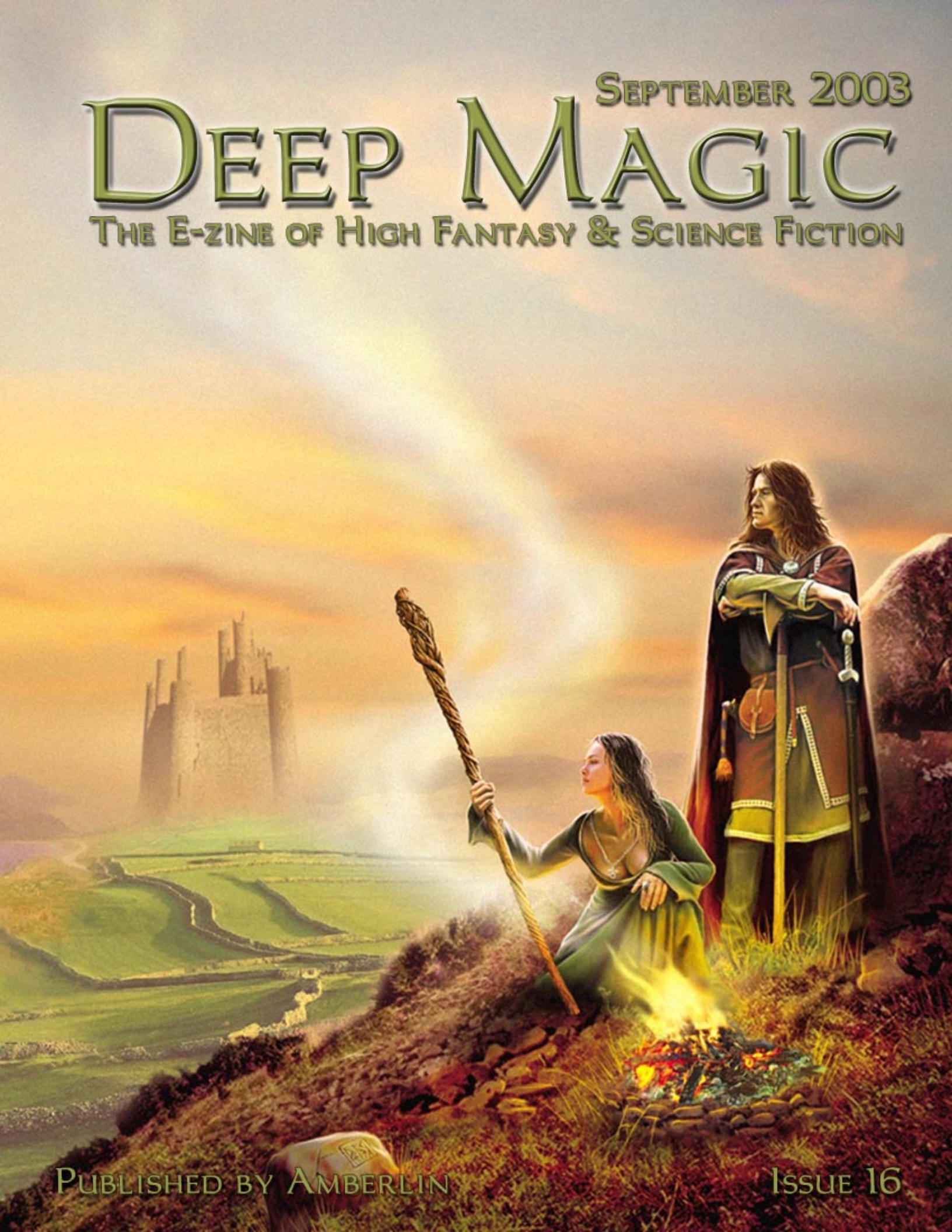
September 2003

# Deep Magic

## The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction



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# September 2003

The weather is starting to change around here, but in a good way. Sometime this month we expect our one thousandth subscriber to Deep Magic (1,000 is such a magic number). We appreciate all of our readers who have told a friend about us.

The votes are in and the selection made for the 2002-2003 winners of Deep Magic's Lamp Post Awards. We watched with bated breath to see which authors and artists met your fancy the most. See our special announcement on page 9 to learn if any of your favorites won this new and prestigious award.

In recent weeks we've been brimming with ideas for meeting some of your fantasy and sci-fi reading needs. Many new readers have told us they enjoy reading our back issues. The editorial staff decided to make it easier to find some of the best work we published in our first year of existence. We have contacted your favorite authors and compiled a special 400-page anthology that will begin production this fall. This will be another trade paperback (like *Landmoor*) and available on-line and by order at your favorite bookstore.

Right now, enjoy our latest serving of Deep Magic. We bring you the fantasy story *The Legend of Thytr* about a cunning soldier in an invading army. In *The Queen is Not Amused*, learn the tale of a hapless and helpless fool who struggles with the affections of his queen. And we also bring you *The Bear Hunt* – a clever tale about a man who discovers that some aliens return what they borrow…with interest. This month also offers part 2 of M. Thomas' article on the types of fantasy writers, continues the fantasy novel *The Rise*, and begins the stunning climax to O.R. Savage's previously run novel *Procyx*. And as a special treat, read our exclusive interview with Jay Wolpert, one of the screenwriters of the hit movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: the Curse of the Black Pearl*. As you can see, we've been very busy.

We would also like to offer special thanks to author Kristen Britain (author of *Green Rider* and the new release *First Rider's Call* published by DAW Books) for writing a special article for our Writing Craft series. See inside for her article "Outlines."

All the best,
The Editors

**Safe Places for Minds to Wander**

# Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers. We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

## September 2003 Writing Challenge

Empathy means putting yourself in another's shoes, feeling, understanding, and relating to what they feel.

This is an essential ability for a writer to master. Without it, Editor Brendon Taylor might only be able to write about 30-something white male attorneys from Southeast Idaho. Undoubtedly, there are many fine tales to be told about just such a character, but at some point, even Brendon's mother may tire of reading them. Eventually.

The challenge this month is to write a short story, scene, or encounter through the perspective of some character as different from yourself as you can imagine. Choose a character of the opposite gender from yourself, with a different background, and different interests. Get into the character's head and portray their emotions, motivations, and thoughts. Make the character real. You must avoid shallow thoughts, clichés and stereotypes to truly succeed at this challenge. Give us your best effort at becoming someone new in 1000 words or less, due by September 15, 2003. We can't wait to meet the new you.

## Selections from the August 2003 Writing Challenge

**Dead Dragons**
**Inukshuk**
**Playful Pastime**

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

*Dialogue in a story can reveal character and human dynamics as much (if not more) than describing their behavior (what they do). Your challenge is this: write a dialogue scene between two people who know each other, each taking the opposite side of an issue or problem. This should be a verbal dance, not a shouting match. The issue should be something immediate (like whether to buy the enchanted Sword of Haberdashery or which fork in the road of the Forbidden Forest to take). Keep it simple and emotionally close to the two people involved. They should reveal themselves in the diaogue, meaning they should reveal more than just what the argument involves. They should reveal a little about themselves and their personality. Make both speakers convincing–don't just load the argument one way or the other. Make each speaker unique in their language, expressions, and tone. Keep in mind the subtext of the conversation–that is, what the conversation reveals about the speakers' relationship to each other–things like power, dominance, love, antipathy, etc.*
*(1000 words or less)*

# Dead Dragons

## By Author Unknown

"Touch it."

"*You* touch it. I'm not touching it."

"Did it just steam?"

"I think they do that. Like chickens after you cut their heads off will still run around."

"It's a great, big, bloody dragon, not some chicken. I want to know it's dead if it's steaming."

"Touch it then."

"I'm *not* touching it. I cut the head off. *You* touch it."

"There. I touched it."

"Oh, yes. Touching it with a six foot twig is really going to bother it."

"It didn't move, did it?"

"It didn't move because it can't feel a six foot twig tickling its smaller left toenail."

"It's my best jousting pole."

"It's a toothpick if that thing wakes up."

"What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean, what are we going to do? We killed a dragon. We're going to be heroes. There will be ale and wenches and lots of cheering."

"Except for the collar, of course."

"What collar?"

"The enormous leather collar there around its neck with the gold plate that says, 'My name is Widgeon, I belong to King Abernathy, who will be happy to have me home. Please contact my owner at the castle of Yreck if I am lost.'"

"The collar that's disintegrating into the thing's boiling blood as we speak, you mean?"

"Yes, that collar—ah, I see what you mean."

"I thought you would. Doesn't look like it's going to be a problem. I didn't get welded into this armor to return somebody's pet. Anyway, what kind of mad king keeps a dragon? And how come he didn't have it on a leash?"

"Are you sure they don't grow new heads? I've heard some of them do that."

"Well, I suppose the only way to find out is to stick around and watch."

"Right. And I would, you know, if Lady Persimmon wasn't waiting for me. She said she'd be very enthusiastic to see me alive again."

"Oh? She's a pip, isn't she? Quite pretty, except for the—"

"It's just a sty. Not a tic. She has a poultice for it."

"Ah."

"Bend my left arm back the right way, would you?"

"Of course. Hurt much? That was very brave of you, dashing in like that."

"Truth be told, I tripped. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Me? Never. Now what do you suppose that globule is there?"

"In the middle of the neck? I didn't see that when we slayed it. Some gristle, maybe?"

"It seems to be getting larger, doesn't it?"

"Some, yes. Looks almost like a snout, doesn't it?"

"We used to play this game when I was younger, with clouds. There's a snout, and there's two eyes, and if you look down there's some pointy bits that look like—"

"Teeth. They look like teeth to me."

"I think you're right. Doesn't Lady Persimmon have a sister?"

"Yes, she does. Lady Kabbage. Has a limp, I'm afraid."

"I heard it was just a twisted ankle. And that they gave her a poultice."

"Very possible."

"Shall we go and see how the sisters are getting on then?"

"I think so, yes. After all, we've slayed this dragon once already, and it was a bloody difficult job too. We deserve some rest."

"It's steaming again."

"I see that."

"Leftover gasses, I suppose."

"I'm sure. Help you to your horse?"

"Thanks. That's kind of you. No, no. Leave the jousting pole. It's starting to smolder anyway."

"Do you think King Abernathy will reward us?"

"Right now I'm rather hoping he never knows we were here."

"I see what you mean. I suppose that means the ale and wenches and cheering is out."

"I think there's a lot to be said for simply living to see another day."

"Too true. I think my armor's giving me a rash."

"Maybe Lady Persimmon has a poultice for it."

# Inukshuk

## By A.M. Stickel

"Now that our last dog has been eaten, what do you plan to do, Eldest Daughter's Husband?"

"Shhh! Father of My Beloved, I think I hear One Who Walks Tall On White Paws."

"I think you hear our teeth chattering and our stomachs growling, Tinuka Blue Eyes."

"Again, I respectfully request silence, My Father."

"It is best to be food for a White Paws, which may in turn feed our village. Sadly, I think our end will not be so useful, Tinuka. Your blue eyes have brought us the bad luck I always knew they would."

"Your dark eyes have not done their job as well as they might, My Father. The inukshuk you thought you saw pointing the way to the sealing grounds has stranded us on rotten ice."

"I swear, Tinuka, that though I only glimpsed the inukshuk briefly, it seemed familiar. The evil magic of the Snow Witch, drawn by your eyes, covered my old stone friend."

"An imaginary pile of rocks cannot be a friend, any more than a blizzard can be a witch's work, Old One. Life is life. Death is death. And that's it. No magic!"

"I think I set those stones myself when I was your age, Tinuka. The long gray one that became the arms was the most beautiful I had ever found. It was hard to make it part of the inukshuk, a beacon for travelers in our North. I wanted to keep it for my first child, your wife.

Maybe my reluctance, and not your blue eyes, put a curse on the inukshuk..."

"Please, let us not continue, My Father. Something comes that is neither man nor beast. Look! It is rock, but walks on water. Ready your spear. We must die with honor."

"Hello, Old Friend. I see you've far outgrown the arms I almost kept at home, and have come to make a believer out of Tinuka Blue Eyes… Tinuka, Tinuka, Son, get up off the ice..."

* * *

"Father, what happened? It's so dark, and I can't stop rolling around. Ouch! Where are we? Is the monster gone?"

"We are in the belly of the inukshuk, Tinuka. My friend fed well on your dreams and is taking us home to the village. We have become part of the magic of the North."

"Help, Father, I'm falling into white coldness."

"Catch me, Tinuka; here come my old bones to join you!"

"Don't worry, I have you, Father. I hurt all over, but how wonderful to be alive. There's our village below us. The inukshuk has vanished."

"We may be nothing but inukshuk droppings in the snow at present, but tonight we celebrate as men again, Tinuka. We will drum so loudly that the inukshuk can dance too."

"I love you, My Father, and I do believe in magic."

"Inukshuk arms picked me up, but your arms caught me, Tinuka. Sometimes they can be one and the same, magic and love, My Son."

# Playful Pastime

## By Andrew Brittin

"You want me to do what?" Malic said, taking a few steps back from the hole in the ground.

"C'mon!" Sirune sat down beside the hole and looked into it curiously. "It can't be that far down, can it?" she said with a wide grin, turning her head to look back at Malic. "You're no fun, you know that? And what could a little adventure do to you? Kill you?" she said in a snide remark. "We live in a the middle of *no where* for god's sake!"

Malic sighed, walking back to the hole and leaned over it. "How far do you think it goes, twenty, thirty feet, perhaps?"

"I say… fifty!" she replied as she bounced.

The color drained from Malic's face. "Pardon…? Fifty? And you want me to go down there? Are you absolutely crazy?"

"Yes?"

"…Ya'know…I have this sickening feeling that this will lead us into *big* trouble. If not with Mum for getting my breeches mud-soaked, then because we're going to find some…some evil wicked thing down there that wants to eat us!"

Sirune giggled and preformed a back roll, her feet landing where her bottom had just sat. "Like I said. You're… no… fun! You read to many of those fantasy things Uncle Richard writes. They're just to scare you. And to think, you're the ten year old, you'd think you'd be more mature."

"*Those* are from his life experiences!" Malic retorted, holding his hands in a frustrated, "I want to choke you" manner. "Arrg!"

She cocked her head, and raised her brow. "A…what did he call that funny thing? The one that ate all the fish from the sea?" she tried holding back her giggles.

Malic sat, dangling his feet into the hole. "It was called a two-headed basperian nymphate from the Coast of Anguria, two hundred years ago!"

She couldn't hold it any longer and burst into laughter and spoke in-between her raving. "But…Uncle Richard is…only thirty!" she stopped and looked at him. "So are you going to go in?"

"You change your mood at the drop of a hat and laugh at things I don't find funny. Why, exactly, do I hang around you?" he lied down, his feet still dangling off the edge.

"Because! Our parents set us up and now we're stuck! Muwahaha!" she thought for a moment, resting her chin on the top of her hand. "We have the rope. I can just lower you in."

"Do you have some disability that doesn't let you concentrate on one subject? It gets quite annoying." he said as he cloud-gazed. "Hmm, a winged beast."

Sirune's eyes narrowed. "…Now look who's talking," she got up, grabbing his shoulders and pushing him forward into the hole.

"What are you—Ahh!" Malic screamed as he pushed his feet against the slippery walls of the hole.

He fell, his eyes looking across the ground as he easily stood in the shallow hole. "I… dislike you with a passion," he growled.

Sirune put her hands behind her head, promptly pivoted on the heel of her foot, and walked away towards the dirt path. "Perhaps. But now we know which trouble it led to."

"Huh?"

"You said, and I quote: 'If not with Mum for getting my breeches mud-soaked, then because we're going to find some evil wicked thing down there…' So," she pivoted again, looking at the tip of his head, "you are getting in trouble because of mud-soaked pants. I sincerely hope your mother is kind with a beating." Sirune teased. "One mystery solved!"

Malic took a deep breath and lifted himself out of the hole, his body now dripping mud. He walked over to Sirune, putting a sloppy arm around her and whispered. "I never go down alone."

Malic then pounced on her, dragging as much mud over her as possible, both screaming playfully. "Fine, fine you win! You win! Stop already! Ahh!" Sirune managed to scoot away from Malic, and get to her feet. "You are evil!"

"Then we're even, good enough for—" he saw Sirune's face go pale and her mouth drop. "What? What is it!" he demanded.

"Th-th-that!" she pointed towards the hole, "Run! Run! Run!" She made turn to run off.

Malic peeked over his shoulder, seeing a large clawed hand, come up and out of the hole. He blinked, and, without any more thought, ran off with Sirune. "I told you! I told you this would happen!"

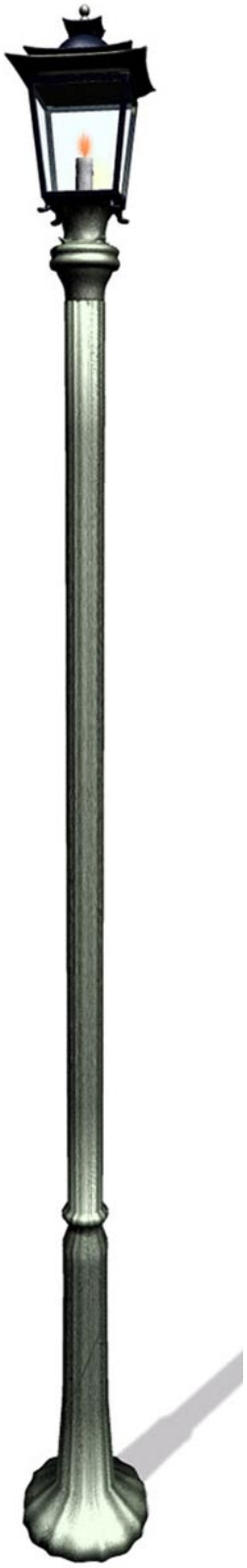
"Okay, okay, I change that around. Uncle Richard is a smart man and we get *both* kinds of trouble!"

"That is not what I wanted to hear!" Malic yelled back. "We have to get to Uncle Richard. He's the only adventurer in the town."

"Exactly what I was thinking!" Sirune hunkered lower, trying to run faster, Malic keeping up as they headed towards town.

# The Lamp Post Awards

Deep Magic would be nothing without the authors and artists who volunteer their talents to the e-zine. Throughout the summer, we have allowed our readers to select the best short stories, artists, and articles from the first year of Deep Magic. We are proud to present the winners in this tight race. There were many excellent selections to choose from, but in the end, only one from each category could win. So without futher ado, we present the 2003 Lamp Post Award winners:



## Best Fantasy Short

Skygrave
by Margo Lerwill
(April 2003)

## Best Science Fiction Short

What Power In a Word
by Alexander R. Brown
(August 2002)

## Best Artist

A Dark Knight
by Jonathan Earl Bowser
(June 2002)

## Best Article

Notes About the Sword
by M. Thomas
(November 2002)

# The Queen is Not Amused

## By Ken Goldman

Fizzbain, favorite fool and jester to the Queen of Hampstead, was not such an imbecile that he did not recognize trouble when he saw it. Tiny Elisabetta missed her pirouette during the difficult third movement of her performance of Le Triomphe de l' Amour. She landed painfully upon her ankle, and Fizzbain heard the snap of the prima ballerina's delicate bone even from where he sat at Queen Drucilla's feet. The young dancer had displayed obvious fatigue after a strenuous Port de Bras, and the radiant smile she had worn throughout the first two movements disintegrated into a twisted grimace of pain during the third.

Still the diminutive ballerina danced even as her ankle swelled and grew purple, reconstructing her lost smile for the benefit of the Queen and her court through eyes that had welled with tears.

Fizzbain's heart wrenched at the sight. He wondered at the admixture of pain and horror through which the beautiful young girl had conceived those salty tears. The Fool dared not steal a glance at his Queen, beneath whose throne he sat cross-legged on the silken floor cushion like a parti-striped crab. But he knew well the countenance royalty wore when displeased. There was not a living soul in the English provinces who could not read displeasure on that withered face.

The Queen raised her arm, and the music abruptly ceased. Alone in the center of the royal court the ballerina stood, dwarfed by the vast hall and seeming to shrink as she remained fixed in place, fearful that even slight movement might incur Her Majesty's further displeasure. No courtier dared applaud, no guest uttered a sound, and the stillness of the palace rivaled that of a graveyard. The young dancer risked a dutiful curtsy in the cold silence, but she could not hide the lightning bolts of pain coursing through her body.

**No courtier dared applaud, no guest uttered a sound, and the stillness of the palace rivaled that of a graveyard.**

For a fleeting moment Fizzbain considered leaping to his feet and frolicking through the crowd to make light of the moment, in the hope that this might diminish the Queen's anger and tilt the scales back in the poor damsel's favor. Such delusions of heroism were, after all, permissible even for a fool, as was the delusion that the girl might love him in return. But the uneasy silence surrounding him convinced the jester that such bravado was not the wisest course of action for a man who intended to wear his head on his shoulders at dawn's light. He might have even cried, but tears that seemed so out of place in the ballerina's eyes hardly befit a clown.

Nor did his love for the beautiful dancer befit the fool and, like his tears, this too the jester kept to himself.

"Rise, foolish girl!" Drucilla spoke in a voice that betrayed little of the anger written on her face, for the many years of her reign had taught her that in all matters public, decorum was the first rule of royalty. Although the redness of her brow belied that belief, she spoke in a manner that suggested ice more than fire.

"Your curtsy is an embarrassment to our guests," she added, while leaning forward on her

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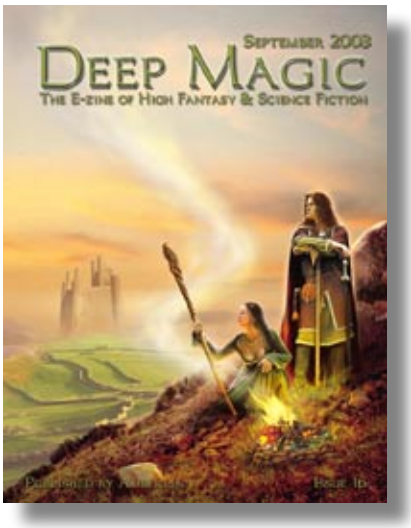
# Featured Artist
## Peter Kudriashov




**Age:** 35
**Residence:** Saint Petersburg, Russia
**Marital Status:** Married
**Children:** Son
**Hobbies:** Music, auto model collecting, travel when possible, etc.
**Personal Quote:** "Everything that happens, happens for the best "
**Favorite Book or Author:** Strugatskiy brothers, "A Snail on a Slope"
**Started Painting In:** I started painting when I was 10-12 years old. I started doing illustrations for fantasy and science fiction in approximately 1990.
**Artist Most Inspired By:** Jim Burns, Michael Whelan, Keith Parkinson.
**Mediums You Work In:** Computer graphics. Oil, water-color, tempera.
**Educational/Training Background:**
**Schools Attended:** Youth art school, art college, Muhina's Academy of Art and Design
**Other Training:** My life.
**Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed:** Fantasy and science fiction books by many large Russian publishers.
**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally:** peter@d-inter.ru or kpi@rambler.ru
**Website URL:** www.peter-gallery.narod.ru and www.d-inter.ru/peter

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**
A: I have been painting since I remember myself. When I was young, I liked fairytales. I can hardly imagine what else could I become other than an artist. It must be my destiny. I am not a fatalist, but it seems to me, sometimes, that some events happen as if without my participation. In reality, nothing has changed, I still paint and still like colorful stories.

**Q: How would you describe your work?**
A: I wish my work showed the romanticism and mystery of the books the illustrations are made for. I try to show their mystery and magic even in realistic things, though only the audience can evaluate how well I can do that.

**Q: Where do you find your inspiration?**
A: Many sources. Literature, art, movies. But mostly music. I enjoy listening to the World music and ethnic music. This inspires me the most for my fantasies. This is similar to meditation.

**Q: What inspired this cover? (Tell us its story)**
A: It was an order for illustrations for a book "Exiles." When I read the text, I wanted to create an illustration that would display the romanticism of the book rather than follow the precise story. It often happens that there are many roads heading for the goal, but not every road reaches it. The publisher liked this illustration. The cover was published.

**Q: What do you consider your influences?**
A: I never specifically thought about it. I don't have a clue as to what influence I can put on something or someone. The only goal I strive for is for someone else besides me to like my work. I try to avoid anger, violence and any other negative idea in my paintings.

**Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**
A: I was most happy when the first book with my illustrations was published. Emotionally, this was my best success. Maybe because it was the fist time, and it was new.

**Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?**
A: On one hand, it seems to me, that science fiction and fantasy become more and more diverse, and maybe more literary, if such comparison is appropriate. People's concept of life, art and literature is changing. Social and ethnic standards are changing as well. New themes and situations occur, which we had never imagined before. All these factors affect science fiction/fantasy genre in any representation. At the same time, technological progress also takes place. It effects the people's concepts of the future machinery. Even in the illustrational art there's more and more of the computer graphics. However, what remains unchanged? If the literature is good, it remains good, if the painting is good, it will remain good.

# Notes on Two Types of Writers, In Case You Are One of Them
## (part 2)
## By M. Thomas

"Sometimes the delete key is your greatest friend."
--Steve Martin, *Writing is Easy!*

Romar drew his blade, and stared into the eyes of his nemesis. Then he feinted to the left, throwing his tartan blanket at Amadogwa instead. The dread warlord, tangled in the cloth, fell into the pit of fire that had opened up under his feet.

More on this later.

For those of you who may have missed the first article, here's a recap:

I have come to the belief that there are two *primary* types of fantasy writers. Though there are a thousand combinations, ultimately most fantasy writers can honestly say they may at least *lean* more toward one category than the other. The first of these is the writer who chooses fantasy as their genre. The second of these is the fantasy buff who chooses writing as their creative outlet. Both have their flaws, but both deserve recognition, and some (hopefully) helpful analysis. Last month I shattered the narrative pride of the writers who choose fantasy. This month, we're working with fantasy buffs who choose writing.

**Fantasy Buffs Who Choose Writing**

You might be a writer who:

- Knows the correct order of Robert Jordan's books.
- Can speak at length on the traditional, mythological characteristics of fantasy species like elves and dwarves, as well as discuss how fantasy literature and media has distorted or changed their perception in current culture. Sometimes you do this as a party trick.
- Can't spell "antidisestablishmentarianism" out loud like the writers can, and don't need to because you can write a heck of a better sword-fight scene than anyone who worries about that kind of nonsense.

Fantasy buffs who choose writing are sometimes those who have, at some point in their lives, had a conversation that went something like this:

"You *can't* capture me with your Elvin Assassins. I have Peregrine's Protection Spell on."

"No, you only said you wanted to *buy* Peregrine's Protection Spell. You never gave up any points to cast it."

continued on next page

"Yes, I *did*. It was when your mom made you go pick up your socks."

Fantasy buffs who choose writing sometimes suffer from a lack of the same thing that writers who choose fantasy over-indulge in. That is, attention to language and structure. Their medium is worlds and characters rather than language, and there they've got one up on the others. Because, *they've played the roles*. They know those characters inside out, because they've *been* those characters. Where the writer may make the character an extension of themselves, the Fantasy buff has made themselves part of the character.

And yet, therein lies the problem. A story is no good with just a character study. And, except for Benjamin Rosenbaum's *Other Cities* series, I've never seen a good world-building exercise work as a story. (And even his weren't meant as stories.) World-building and character studies do not a story make.

Fantasy buffs who choose writing sometimes forget other important details as well. They sometimes are naïve to--or ignore--grammatical conventions, trusting some editor to know exactly what they mean when they say, "And then brave Romar raised his sword and kilt him." At which point the editor wonders whether "kilt them" refers to death by brightly patterned wool. They will begin a story with an excess of adjectives, such as, "Romar drew his long, silvery, glistening blade, and stared into the deep, black, devious eyes of his evil, wicked, cunning nemesis." Author Caro Clark nicknames this "Furry Dice" in her article, "Beginner's Four Faults." She says, "Adjectives, adverbs and prepositions are furry dice hanging from a car's mirror. They don't do anything for the car's performance, they simply clutter the place."

As a writer and editor, I sometimes see fantasy based on role-playing or fan-fic that just doesn't work. Either because the author doesn't delve deeply enough into the adversity, or because of a lack of grammatical know-how. But then again, I've been a beginning writer—when I started we didn't have the online resources we do today—and I know how it is. (And no, there weren't dinosaurs wandering about back then, thank you very much.)

What Fantasy buffs who choose writing *have* is a multitude of characters and worlds that are bizarre and strange and wonderful. They have worlds that are all new, or reflect somehow our own world in a subtle sort of mystical parallelism.

What they often *need* is an understanding of less-is-more. Though the desire may be to bring to the reader all they see in their imagination, they must learn to trust their reader's imagination more. They often need to understand, as do the writers who choose fantasy, what Heather Grove calls lesson number 3 in "7 Lessons Writers Don't Want to Learn".

Like many other things, writing breaks down into skill and talent. You may have some natural talent (or maybe not), but that doesn't mean that you have the skill yet (and if you don't have the talent, that doesn't mean you can't develop the skill). Skill takes time and effort to develop. It involves developing an understanding of everything from proper grammar and spelling to pacing and metaphor.

Fantasy buffs who choose writing must do away with the desire to build and build and build until characters and worlds collapse under the weight of their own detail. They must learn simplicity, and to trust the reader. If you read my first article, you might just recognize those ideals. In the end, the two groups are not so different after all.

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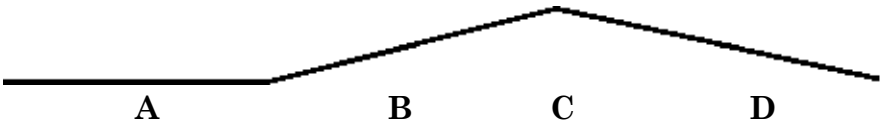
**Finding Simplicity**

It's as difficult for the fantasy buffs as it is for the writers who choose fantasy. Nobody likes to have to "murder their darlings," when writing. Yet it's often the only way to rescue an over-burdened piece of writing. Case in point: these articles. They were originally one loooong article. Editor Jeff Wheeler suggested that I might lose my audience. So I split them into two, and took out a lot of clever witticisms. Trust me, you don't know what you're missing. But in the interest of getting the point across, I took a large pair of electronic shears to the original article, and came up with these two, which are more focused and easily digestible in a single sitting, one would hope. In the interest of your fiction writing, and simplicity, there is a very simple equation:

**C + A = P**

Character, plus adversity, equals plot. In the first article, you might have tried the exercise wherein you narrowed down your character description to 10 words, and the character's adversity to 20 words, both complete sentences. For this article, your challenge is to create a plot diagram. You remember these. Your language arts teacher tortured you with them in school. So, draw the funny triangle.




In section A, you must describe the genesis of the story in 50 words or less. Consider the *most important* aspects. Who is the main character, and what event occurs to change their life? I'll use Romar.

> A. Romar is the king's champion. He hates this role, because all his defining "champion" moments have been due to complete luck. He feels he is masquerading as a hero. He is sent to fight the evil usurper, Amadogwa. He is afraid he will fail, and be unmasked.

In section B, you must describe the events that lead to the climax. This means, you must already have the climax in mind.

> B. After several humiliating defeats, in which Romar comes to his moment of darkest self-doubt, he is spurred on by the blind admiration of his young squire, Geoffrey, who adores him, and Lady Persimmon, who believes he is destined to be a hero. He confronts Amadogwa.

In section C, you must describe the climax. It must be the turning point for the character, where all their personal problems are shunted aside in favor of--not fame, not glory--accomplishing a goal. They lose their masks, their arrogance, and their self-doubt here. They learn humility, and conquer in spite of themselves.

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C. Romar and Amadogwa battle on the edge of a fiery pit. Romar loses his sword in a foolish under-estimation of his enemy. He must then use his wits to triumph. He tangles Amadogwa in his kilt, sending the evil one to his well-deserved death.

In section D, you get to throw your hero a party. You also have some time to set up the next book, or just let Romar return triumphant, with a new understanding of his short-comings, as well as his talents. There may also be sex. That's up to you, Romar, and Lady Persimmon, although I imagine the lady will have the last word on it, as they often do. Dutiful squire Geoffrey is on his own, and really too young to be engaging in things like that.

D. Romar returns, exhausted, to his king. He receives his just praise and reward, then retires to a nice manor with Persimmon to live an easy life and do some nice things for his serfs. He sends Geoffrey off to be trained by real heroes, with glowing recommendations.

Simplicity. If you can't map your story like this, it's got fuzzy edges and may need some re-working.

**Trusting Your Reader**

I can imagine the dry mapping above, and the exercises from the previous article, have got a few people chomping at the bit. It hardly reflects the myriad levels of your story. And it shouldn't. That's just the skeleton. Now we get to the writing. Yes, the desire and instinct to fill in the reader's imagination remains the same for both types. Writers who choose fantasy want to fill it in with meaningful prose. Fantasy buffs want to fill it in with description. The reader needs neither, unless it is well-considered, and well-placed. Therefore, choose a piece of writing where you have outdone yourself. Choose a description that Peter Jackson might drool over.

Now the process.

1.Take out all the adjectives and adverbs. I know it's hard, but you can do it.
2.Take out any "saidisms." Any dialogue tag that says anything other than "said."

Now the revision.

1.Look at what you have left. Check your spelling and sentence structure. "Butt how important can spelling bee? Its knot important when I right, and their not gong to sea the deference any whey," is *ALL SPELLED CORRECTLY*.
2.You may add back in one adjective. Make it a good one. Make it count.
3.You **may not** put back in any saidisms. Repeat after me: saidisms are evil, until I am a best-selling author. If you don't believe me, go back and read ""Said Bookisms," she Growled," by Margo Lerwill, in the May edition of Deep Magic.

In summation, I'll leave you with this from Robert Jordan's article "Put Up, or Shut Up":

…just because you have a story inside you, doesn't mean you can write it, any more than

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having a gallstone means you can pass it. I no longer believe that everybody can write. It's not that easy.

It really isn't. If you're a lover of words, you have to learn when to cut them out. If you're a lover of fantasy with aspirations of writing, you have to learn about the writing parts too. Until then, we are all novices struggling toward the same goal: writing good fantasy stories that carry a reader's imagination with them. We can make it, if we keep writing.

And here's the end of Romar's tale…

Romar went to help his squire rise.
"What happened?" Geoffrey asked.
"The dread warlord is dead," Romar said, fingering a tattered remnant of plaid cloth. "I kilt him."

# The End

Robert Jordan - Tips on Writing

Heather Grove's 7 Lessons

Benjamin Rosenbaum's "Other Cities" (search in archive)

# The Bear Hunt

## By Ian Morrison

Mr. Simms, can you tell us exactly what was stolen?"

"Of course. I've got it all written down right here." He picked up a grimy yellow pad from the workbench. Fumbling with drugstore glasses, he began to read. "A needle-nose pliers, four-ounce spool of silver solder, six brazing rods, twelve-inch adjustable wrench, ball peen hammer, three screwdrivers," he paused, looking up, "and my welding rig."

"Welding rig?"

"Yes, it was chained on a cart. Both tanks were full, acetylene and oxygen, a Victor Pro set with cutting torch and National gauges, never given me a bit..."

"You keep this stuff all locked up?"

Ray Simms measured the deputies carefully. They were city cops despite being Ayacama County's finest. Away from sidewalks they might as well be in a foreign land.

"I don't lock anything, never have, and been living here my whole life. Now you tell me how that welding rig got out of here."

The two deputies looked uncomfortable and there was the slightest shuffling of feet.

"Well, I reckon someone walked right in, wheeled it over to a truck, and drove off." It was the younger of the two. He was tall, blond, and taking great pains to be polite.

"Nobody drives back in here without me knowing it. Ever try to wheel a welding cart over terrain like that?" He pointed out the barn door to the uneven ground that stretched away to the deputy's patrol car. He winced, lowering his arm.

**There they were, lying on their sides, as spotless as the day he had brought them back from the salvage yard.**

"What about neighbors?"

Ray could see that the older man was trying to finish a list of questions.

"Well, there aren't any close by and I know them all. Besides, nothing's ever been taken before." It sounded lame and he was aware that he was wasting everyone's time. They were looking at him as if he was senile.

"Mr. Simms, if someone tries to sell this stuff, there's a good chance we can get it back, especially the welding rig. That's a big item."

He wasn't surprised when after a short, unenthusiastic search, they drove off. He walked back toward the house, trying to ignore the pain in his left shoulder. Nearing the front steps, he moved into the mottled shade of an oak. He loved the space under the huge tree, like being under a giant bird's wing.

Inside the house, he started to tell Emma of his encounter with the sheriff's deputies and how it wasn't losing the tools that hurt so much, but the thought that someone would take them out of his barn. He stopped when he saw she was deep into a stack of mail order catalogs. She was trying to read again, and he decided not to bother her.

He was still working it over in his mind the next morning when Emma interrupted his thoughts.

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# To Outline, or Not to Outline?

## By Kristen Britain

The question is asked frequently, but there is no right or wrong answer. It falls, really, to individual preference. What works for you? I have written novels with and without outlines, and from experience, I've discovered my (current) preference.

My first novel, *Green Rider,* was written without an outline. I had a basic concept of what the book was going to be about: a girl runs away from school, encounters a dying messenger on the road who pleads with her to carry his message to the king, and she gets into lots of trouble along the way. That was it, my idea of an outline, and writing the book proved adventurous not only for my protagonist, but for me as well. We never knew what we'd encounter around the next bend.

I worked out a lot of the story details as I walked, biked, and hiked the trails on the Maine island where I live. Sometimes the natural terrain itself offered possibilities and ideas: I could see my protagonist riding her horse down the rustic roadways I rode my bicycle on, or I could see her trying to hide in the dense forest. I also think there is something hypnotic about repetitive motion that allows one to sink into "story space", the place where the subconscious and conscious merge and generate ideas. It helped me to decide "what's next" for my protagonist and her trusty steed.

In addition, I kept, and still keep, a story journal in which I can talk to myself and work out plot problems or jot down ideas. If I wanted to work out the chronological events of a scene, I could do so in my journal. In a sense, I was creating mini-outlines along the way.

Not having an over-arching outline for *Green Rider* worked for that particular book. The plot is fairly linear, and I had all the time in the world to fiddle with it since I was not writing under contract. I had no editor, publisher, or audience waiting on me to produce it; I was writing it for me alone. Eventually, I did shop the finished manuscript around to various publishers, who rejected it, and an agent who kindly pointed out to me that some important plot points were missing. I agreed, and embarked on a new revision, and this time the manuscript sold. Would an outline have saved me the trouble of rejections and revision by getting everything right the first time? I honestly don't know.

When it came to writing the sequel, I could not afford the luxury of time to create the book in the same organic fashion in which I wrote *Green Rider*. Things had changed. Not only was the structure of the sequel going to be more complex, but my personal life had become more complex as well: I took on more responsibilities at my day job, I was now writing under the pressure of a contract with all those expectations weighing heavily on me, and the fates toy mercilessly with one's personal life without regard to one's need to write a book! There was no time for lengthy, peaceful woodland walks to work out the plot, and it was clear I needed the security of an outline to create this novel.

Developing the outline took several months, and it turned out rather detailed. It was like writing a small version of the novel, but as an expository narrative that summarized the story and hinted at tone, and provided only snippets of dialog. It formed the skeleton of the story with some of the tendons and muscles to hold it together, but lacking the overall flesh.

For me, the outline was a life saver. I didn't hit roadblocks when plot threads intersected,

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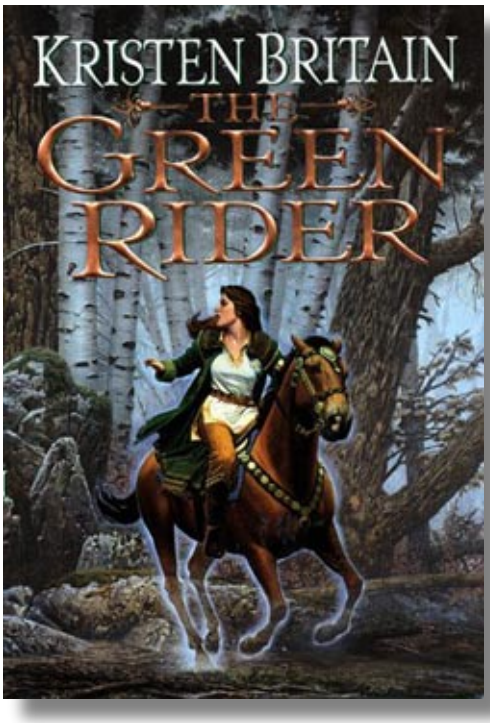
I didn't go off on accidental side trips and get lost, all because I had a road map to guide me. Did it stilt the creative process? No. In fact I believe it enhanced the experience. I found I could focus more on the actual writing and story elements since I didn't have to wrangle over structural issues. The process was easier and more enjoyable with the outline, and those little surprises that make writing such a joy still managed to pop up and added tremendously to the story.

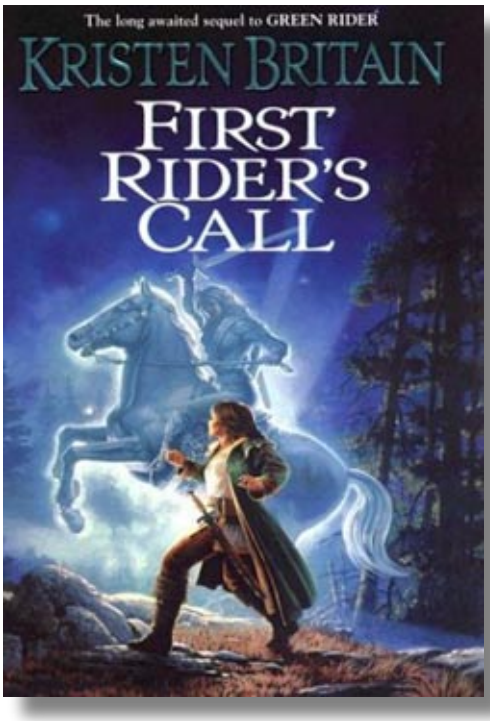
Currently, I am writing the third installment of the Green Rider series, and I am once again using an outline, but this one is not nearly as detailed as the one I created for the sequel. At times I wish it were, but it's too soon to judge the outline's effectiveness. Check with me when the book is done!

Remember always to choose the route that works best for you, and not to worry about how others get the job done. Make the process enjoyable for yourself. Otherwise, why go to all the effort?

## The End

Click the thumbnails below to purchase Kristen Britain's novels, *The Green Rider* and *First Rider's Call*.

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# Kristen Britain
## Interview

**Residence:** Maine
**Children:** Two cats, one dog, all boys.
**Hobbies:** Guitar playing, reading, walking, paddling, hiking, drawing.
**Personal Quote:** Do what works.
**Favorite Book or Author:** THE LORD OF THE RINGS, by J.R.R. Tolkien
**Professional and Educational Information:** BS, Communications with writing minor, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY. 14.5 years as a national park ranger.
**First Time You Tried To Get Something Published:** I was a teenager. Published a horse cartoon book when I was 14.
**Authors Most Inspired By:** J.R.R. Tolkien, Anne McCaffrey, Lloyd Alexander
**Published works:** GREEN RIDER, DAW Books, 1998; FIRST RIDER'S CALL, DAW Books, 2003; "Avalonia" in OUT OF AVALON, edited by Jennifer Roberson, Roc 2001; "Linked, on the Lake of Souls" in DAW BOOKS 30TH ANNIVERSARY: FANTASY, edited by Betsy Wollheim and Shiela Gilbert, DAW Books, 2002.
**Website URL:** www.kristenbritain.com

**Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published**
A: It's a really long story, but I'll try to summarize. It took less than a year to write the first draft of GREEN RIDER, then I fiddled with it some, and tried to learn about publishing. I sent it unsolicited to a few publishers, and received "positive" rejections. I even sent it to an agent who wrote a letter back saying it was promising, maybe even publishable, but lacked some elements. I reread the manuscript, agreed with his assessment, and embarked on revisions. An author I know agreed to look it over, as well, and made some more suggestions. Eventually, the revised manuscript was all set to go. My author friend sent his agent a letter about me and my book, and a colleague of the agent called me the next day to ask if she could see it. Of course she could see it! In a matter of weeks she agreed to represent it, and within a couple months, two publishers expressed interest in the book, including DAW, which eventually purchased the rights to publish it. My agent and I thought that DAW was the best home for the book. Eventually, rights were also sold to publishers in the UK, Germany, and Poland, which is pretty cool. To give readers an idea of the time span it took for all this to occur, I started writing the book in the fall of 1992. In 1993, I started revising a little and shopped it around. In 1995, my author friend looked it over, and I embarked on the new revision. The book sold to DAW in 1996, and the first hardcover edition came out almost exactly two years later. Publishing takes time.

**Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?**
A: I can only guess that writers were a lot more anonymous before the internet. Now, readers have a lot more access to information and reviews and online booksellers via the internet, and probably find it much easier to zip off an email to authors rather than the old fashioned way of writing on actual paper and sending the letter via snail mail. I communicate with readers and publishers mostly by email, so in that way it's quite handy. It also gives me a "voice" at my

own website, where anyone can take a look and see what's new, see what books I've written and sample the chapters I've posted there, etc.

**Q: Do you have any favorite characters?**
A: If you are speaking in regards to my own writing, I like all my characters and have fun with them, though I have a special place in my heart for the villains.

**Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?**
A: Obstinance. I never gave up, and I think that's true with many writers. I'm not sure that falls under the category of "influences" though. I had some terrific English and writing teachers who encouraged me to keep writing, so I guess I would term them "positive influences."

**Q: What have you been reading lately?**
A: Heh, I just picked up the latest Harry Potter at a midnight launch party, but it will have to sit in my To Be Read Pile, along with several Laurel K. Hamilton "Anita Blake" novels, and Mindy Klasky's latest. I just finished reading THE MAN WHO LISTENS TO HORSES and SHY BOY by Monty Roberts.

**Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?**
A: I've never really kept track. I know that when I was working full time at the day job, all available time went to writing, if I wasn't sleeping, eating, or mowing the lawn that is.

**Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?**
A: Obstinance. See above ;-)

**Q: Many fantasy novels these days have strong adult themes (violence, language, sexual situations). Your work has been described as being tame in comparison. What is your opinion on this issue and how does it affect your writing?**
A: The fantasy literature I grew up loving did not require strong adult themes to tell a great story. It awakened my sense of wonder, not my sense of horror. The traditional archetypes and conflicts of good vs. evil were empowering, and the evil was well drawn enough not to require explicit, hard-edged adult themes. I'm not knocking "hard fantasy". There are authors who handle adult themes vividly and well, and it's out there for those who want it. In my own case, while I read some occasional "hard fantasy", I'd rather not have my sense of horror awakened too often–there's enough horror in the real world. While no writer can "compete" with the truly awful things real people do to one another, I'd rather not be reminded of it. I prefer to be enchanted, and I think this is conveyed in my work. That is not to say that there is not a hard edge that occurs in my books, but it's not the focus–the story and characters are. In addition, the tone was set with the first book in the series, and suddenly intensifying those themes could be perceived as inconsistent. However, if the story demands it in a scene or two? It will be done, and the readers will not be numb to it since I haven't bludgeoned them with it up to this point. It will have more impact. Actually, I've received a lot of "thank yous" from readers relieved not to find the first book drenched in gore or swearing or sex. That doesn't mean I won't cross the line if the story requires it. And it's all about story after all.

# Page Turners
## Deep Magic Looks at Books

One request we frequently get here in the offices of Deep Magic is for recommendations on what else to read. I mean, let's face it, even when we provide you, our faithful readers, with an issue of nearly 200 pages of quality high fantasy and science fiction, that's still not enough. We would have to produce a weekly e-zine in order to meet many of our readers' needs for quality fiction.

To help meet that need, Deep Magic is proud to present a monthly book review column in which we'll tantalize you with discussions of quality (and sometimes not-so-quality) books.

To help you make informed decisions on what to read, we've included with our reviews two handy features. First, each review will rate the book or series on a scale of one to five. In keeping with our Lamp Post Awards, we've chosen the lamp post as our rating icon. Five lamp posts means a book that every library should have. One lamp post means a book whose sole merit is it makes a good shimmy to keep your desk level. Second, in keeping with our motto of 'safe places for minds to wander,' at the end of each review, we are including a brief synopsis of areas that some might find objectionable. These two features inter-relate only insofar as too much objectionable material quite often reflects a book that is more concerned with sensationalism than with telling a good story.

So, enough of this, let's dive into the books!

### Editor's Choice: Classic Fantasy
## The Sword of Shannara
### By Terry Brooks

There is a cult of originality in our culture. It seems that unless you're the first to come up with an idea, it's not an idea worth having. Authors are constantly being told that their ideas are not original. W.H. Auden had a wonderful to reply to this—what authors should be aiming for is authenticity and not originality. Indeed, originality was, until about 200 years ago, seen as a weakness of a work. If you did not borrow your ideas from a time-tested tradition, what good were your ideas, other than a flash in the pan? In our post-Romantics culture where the author is idolized to the point of deity, however, originality is the catch-all.

One of the complaints about high, epic fantasy—a complaint that has taken on almost mantra-like status—is that it is not original, that it tends to be the same basic ideas and plot devices expressed over and over again. What we need, we are told, is a highly original story each time out.

But if this is actually what the market desires, then why is the history of modern epic fantasy the history of recurring ideas, themes, and plots told again and again? The answer is one that I might get into in another article, but for now, let's look at the evidence by looking at what many consider to be the book that started the whole epic fantasy sub-genre. No, not *The Lord of the Rings*—that started the modern fantasy genre—but Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara*.

Until it was published in 1977, epic fantasy as a sub-genre didn't really exist. Yes, there were some epic fantasies being written, but not enough to call it a sub-genre. Then Del Rey came out with a book that was remarkably like *The Lord of the Rings*, written by newcomer Terry Brooks. It sold like crazy, making the New York Times bestseller list, and a sub-genre was born.

*The Sword of Shannara* tells the tale of half-elven, half-human Shea Ohmsford who is the only remaining heir of Elf legend Jerle Shannara, who defeated the dread Warlock Lord many years prior with the talismanic Sword of Shannara. The sword, which can be wielded only by an heir of Shannara, now rests in the Druids

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Keep of Paranor, where the gnomes of the Warlock Lord are preventing any from taking it.

Shea, however, is unaware of all this, living his life in peaceful Shady Vale, until the mysterious Allanon appears to reveal to Shea what his true heritage is. After Allanon disappears, Shea and his step-brother Flick flee Shady Vale when a Skull Bearer, one of the Warlock Lord's minions, appears. They eventually make their way to the dwarf refuge city of Culhaven where they meet up with Allanon and form a fellowship with representatives from the friendly races of their world to attempt to recapture the Sword of Shannara.

If the story so far sounds familiar, it should: it's remarkably similar to the first two books of *The Lord of the Rings*. Brooks' telling is almost a clone of Tolkien's, leading some critics to coin the term "Tolclone" of which Brooks is often held up as exemplar.

Confession time here: I am a great admirer of J.R.R. Tolkien's work, and so I have always found it hard work to get through the first half of *The Sword of Shannara* where Brooks mimics Tolkien's story line so closely. If the story had ended at the half-way point, then the naysayers would have plenty to complain about, but it is the second half of this lengthy (about 700 pages) tale that redeems the first half. For it is in the second half that Brooks breaks away from the slavish copying of Tolkien and instead begins to take on a voice of his own. So as not to spoil any of the book, I won't go into detail about the plot, but the book reads as if Brooks, once he pushed aside the ghost of Tolkien, was able to breathe more freely and create a story that is still an homage to the master of fantasy while at the same time being a story told in Brooks' own voice and with his own ideas.

If Brooks were to rewrite this book, I'd tell him to not worry about the second half, but re-do the first half, for it's slavish following to Tolkien drags it down, but once he breaks loose, it becomes a work that many can and have enjoyed.

*Possible objectionable material: mild violence.*

*(Review by Matthew Winslow)*

Book Review: Fantasy

## Lord of Snow and Shadows

By Sarah Ash

Gavril Andar, a poor painter in the southern country of Smarna, has just landed a great commission: to paint the betrothal portrait of the Altessa Astasia Orlova from the nearby country of Muscobar. Gavril, unfortunately, falls in love with the altessa whilst painting her portrait, but that brief affair is cut short when the altessa's family discovers what is happening. Thrown out onto his luck, Gavril fears that he will never be able to realize his love with the altessa.

Then one night, a host of barbarians from the far north show up on Gavril's doorstep, claiming he is their Drakhaon, the leader of their people since their previous leader—the man whom Gavril never knew as his father—has been killed. The proof of Gavril's heritage is in his blood, for in the blood of the Drakhaons resides the Drakhaol, a dragon-like creature that at times of great distress takes over the Drakhaon. The only way for Gavril to keep the Drakhaol from taking control is for him to drink the blood of virgin maidens.

Gavril, incredulous and not wanting to live in the barbaric north, is kidnapped by the barbarians and spirited back to Azhkendir. There he must learn how to be a barbarian warlord possessed by a demon, while also avenging the murder of his father.

Were that not enough, there is also political intrigue going on both within the court of Azhkendir, with rival claimants to the throne, as well as abroad, with neighboring Tielin maneuvering to conquer both Muscobar and Azhkendir, through regular warfare and espionage and intrigue.

*Lord of Snow and Shadows* is an intriguing book, well written and captivating, blending diverse elements of Slavic culture (upon which all the cultures are based) to create a relatively fresh fantasy world. The book is the first of a series entitled The Tears of Atramon (referring to a set of jewels that need to be gathered together before a single ruler can rule all of the continent of Rossiya), but

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the main storyline of the novel is resolved satisfactorily. I have never read any of Sarah Ash's novels before, but this captivating read will lead me to look up her other works, and wait anxiously for the next book in the series.

*Possible objectionable material: The subtext of vampirism may upset some readers. There are also a few scenes of mildly grotesque imagery.*

*(Review by Matthew Winslow)*

## Book Review: Fantasy
## Niamh and the Hermit
### By Emily C.A. Snyder

Let me put all my cards on the table and confess that I am a strong supporter of the small press movement. There is a lot of good fiction being printed by the large houses, but let's face it: even their bold and innovative stuff is quite tame and lacking, following set ideas about what makes a good book. I often lament that we will never see something as good, as fresh, or as invigorating as Narnia or *The Lord of the Rings*. Instead, what we get are pale imitations of them.

But the small presses are working to change all that. Even though they have a bottom line to observe, they are not corporate behemoths, and so are more willing to take chances and publish 'the good stuff.' True, there's a lot of tripe that is coming from fly-by-night presses, but if one sifts through all of it (or reads a quality book column like this one!), one can find quality fantasy that blows away the stuff being written by the large houses.

And I'm pleased to announce that Arx Publishing has just published one such novel, *Niamh and the Hermit* by Emily C.A. Snyder.

The Princess Niamh, half-mortal and half-fairy, is so gloriously fair that her beauty drives most men mad. But the kingdom needs an heir. The hope of the kingdom lies in the mysterious Hermit, the only one who can endure Niamh's beauty. The Hermit arrives and it appears as if he is the kingdom's answer. But an evil count deceives Niamh and begins to lead her down the road to perdition. The Hermit, true to his noble nature, sets out to find her. The book traces the events that befall both Niamh and the Hermit as they set upon their respective quests: she to find herself, he to find her.

Written in a style reminiscent of Lord Dunsany and William Morris, *Niamh and the Hermit* is a beautiful fairy tale. As with both of those great fantastic stylists, it takes a few pages to get into the voice of the novel, but once there, it fits comfortably. If you're extra sensitive to the appropriate usage of 'thee' and 'thou' vs. 'you' (I am, having studied medieval language and literature in grad school), I recommend you read the appendices first where the usage is explained.

The imaginary world of the 12 Kingdoms is also well realized; although Ms. Snyder focuses more on the telling of her story than on the description of her world, she has still created a world that resonates with the reader. It is vaguely medieval, vaguely renaissance, and thoroughly enjoyable.

*Possibly objectionable material: none.*

*(Review by Matthew Winslow)*

## Book Review: Science Fiction
## Memory
### By Linda Nagata

If a child should ask, *What is the world?* a parent might answer, "It is a ring-shaped island of life made by the goddess in defiance of the frozen dark between the stars. On the outer rim of this ring there is mostly land, and that is where we live. On the inner rim there is only ocean…"

But if a child should ask, *What is the silver?* the answer might take many forms.

continued on next page

"It is a fog or glowing particles that arises at night to rebuild the world."

"It is a remnant of the world's creation."

"It is the memory of the world."

'It is the dreaming mind of the wounded goddess and you must never go near her! Her dreams will swallow any player they touch. Do you want to be swallowed up by the silver? No? Then stay inside at night. Never wander."

Jubilee is obsessed with the silver. When she was ten, a silver flood rolled into the bedroom she shared with her brother Jolly. Jolly moved toward it, and was enveloped in its luminous fog. No one can survive silver. Once enveloped, a living creature simply disappears. That was what happened to Jolly.

Silver is a fog that rises at night, sometimes it leaves what it touches unchanged, but often it alters things. An ancient city might appear where a forest had stood the day before. It shapes and reshapes the world, often bringing the past to the present.

The lives of the people (called players) are also recycled. Players are reborn again and again. They cannot remember previous lives, but they retain skills that lie dormant until the player is reminded of them.

A few years after her brother disappeared, a mysterious stranger appears out of the silver and demands to see Jubilee's brother. He claims to know Jolly, but then disappears into the silver again before Jubilee can ask him about the silver or her brother.

Jubilee then undertakes a quest to discover all she can about the man who can travel through silver and find her lost brother. As the truth unfolds, Jubilee discovers she had been faced with the same choices in previous lives, but would the outcome always be the same?

This book was truly a pleasure to read. It is a very well-written story that incorporates science-fiction with a twist of eastern philosophy. The world and plot were original and engaging. The story was compelling and well-paced. The one element of the story I didn't just love was the characters. They were likable enough, but not brilliantly written. I wouldn't be surprised to see a sequel, because some of the story's loose ends were unresolved.

*No objectionable material.*

*(Review by Rochelle Buck)*

## Deep Magic Survey

Please take part in this month's survey. We would like to know a little bit about how far our e-zine travels in the world. We want to know where you live, how much you pass your copy of Deep Magic around, and if you receive our monthly announcements. Please take a couple minutes to take the survey.

Click here to take the survey.

# The Legend of Thytr

## By Brendon Taylor

Sun-baked hills the color of rust and dried blood huddled around Horseshoe Valley like a massive dam. The only thing they kept out was the blowing sand, but that was good enough. The valley had not been chosen for its inhospitable beauty, but for its location. The Coable Desert stretched within a day's ride of the woodland realm of Calhoun, and the valley was the closest point to the border where any sizable force could gather unnoticed.

At first, only a handful of ashen soldiers set up camp in the valley. The ashen received meager reward for the bone-wearing labor they performed. Under the direction of a bald-headed kymer, they dug a well in the north end of the valley. Most were wise enough to thank the sorcerer for his guidance and attributed his talents with finding a place where water lingered only thirty spans below ground. The kymer also aided them by drawing fire from his fingers to mold a ridge of stone around the well, which kept blowing sand from undoing their labors as fast as they shoveled. Then, the ashen set up tents, traveled to the east to fetch wagonloads of firewood, and secured large stores of food. With camp ready, the shardsmen came.

**Thytr could end it at any time, and any trained eye could see that. He let Jerly attack until his breaths came in gulps and wheezes.**

The ashen could not tell one shardsman from another, but knew well enough to follow orders when given and stay out of their way. Legends of the Southland knights, called assassins by some and worse by others, passed from one Southland town to another. Not everyone believed all that was said about them, but most agreed that shardsmen lived until their blood was spilled in battle. They never aged, grew sick, or left the order. Their dark blades, called blackshards, outmatched every foe and dealt death in the name of the Creators. What most of the Southland did not know was how soon they would march into battle again.

Hundreds of shardsmen, in uniforms of hard black leather, trained from sunrise until beyond dark. Even in mid-winter, the Coable's heat was oppressive. Most wearied or wilted, but Thytr enjoyed the long hours and heat. He was eager to work the other shardsmen to weariness and prove his quality to the eyes that sought leaders among the Mohd'Athon, or youngers. By his estimation, his skill with the blackshard had thus far been unmatched by any of the other younger shardsmen. He knew the handful of ancient Dor'Athon, the original shardsmen, watched, appraised, and marked the Mohd'Athon. Thytr welcomed their eyes.

A trickle of sweat rolled down his cheek as Thytr sparred with another Mohd'Athon. Jerly hulked over him like a harpenel tree, but moved like one too—lunging and recovering like a branch on a slow breeze. Thytr slid aside just enough for the blade to miss him. He could see that Jerly was biting at the bait, thinking himself just missing with each lunge. Thytr could end it at any time, and any trained eye could see that. He let Jerly attack until his breaths came in gulps and wheezes. Then, with a controlled sweep that Jerly barely cleared, Thytr set himself in position and slapped his opponent hard on the face with the flat side of the practice blade. He chuckled as Jerly fell to his knees.

Thytr wiped the sweat from his cheek and scanned around, surveying the other

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# Jay Wolpert
## Interview

Deep Magic's interview with Jay Wolpert, screenwriter of
PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN and THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

**DM:** Tell us the story of how you came to write the original screenplay for PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN and how it made it into the right hands to be produced. What was the timeline?
**Jay:** It was a unique situation. I had written two scripts previously. One was in turnaround – that's where a studio pays for script then decides they don't want to do it – and the other was *Count of Monte Cristo*. I was in Cabo with a friend on a fishing trip and got a call from Disney who said they were interested in doing a movie version of their theme-park ride. I asked what the tone they were going after. The answer was "kind of an *Indiana Jones* meets *Zorro*." – I said I can do that because, you see, I've never met a sword I didn't like.

The next step was that they sent me a "treatment" – that was a one-page summary of the idea. It basically said the movie is based on the ride, and it traced a few characters briefly…Will, Elizabeth, Governor, Bad Pirate, Army officer/traitor character. In screenwriting, you get the opportunity to pitch an idea without being guaranteed the job. So I had the opportunity to come to them with a "take" (the movie, loosely laid out). Some writers do very complete takes, other writers do loose takes. I wrote mine in about three weeks. And Disney fell in love with the story.

**DM:** The movie is out right now, so when did this happen? Give us an idea of how long the process takes.
**Jay:** They approached me in the Fall of 2000.

**DM:** What other screenplays have you done?
**Jay:** My first was a semi-autobiographical piece called *In the Year of the Brat* about a summer I spent in my youth taking care of rich kid. That's still in "turnaround" at MGM. Then I did *Count of Monte Cristo* – the first one that made it all the way through as a film. I recently finished *Iron Bow* about William Tell and another one for Disney, a live-action version of *The Sword in the Stone*.

**DM:** Are you going to write the sequel to PIRATES?
**Jay:** Since they have already signed Rossio and Elliott, I guess the answer is no.

**DM:** How does a screenplay manuscript evolve from a first draft to the actual film? How many others have input into what stays and what is removed/reworked? How much involvement do you have in the project as it moves forward?
**Jay:** When someone typically pays you to write a screenplay, you have a specific obligation to write a "draft and a set" – that means you write one draft, then they get four weeks to read and give comments, then I make the revisions. Done. After the revisions, they have option to request

more work…for more money. So, let's talk about PIRATES. The first draft had similarities to what ended up on the screen – but there were differences too. Like the movie, it had a nasty pirate who was first mate to Jack who mutinies against him and takes Jack's ship and maroons Jack. Also, like the final movie, the pirates weren't interested in booty but an icon – but in my draft it wasn't a medallion worn by Elizabeth, it was a legendary Golden Galleon given to Henry Morgan by other Pirate Captains. Whoever held the galleon was recognized as "captain of captains." There weren't any undead skeletons for the crew at all. That fantasy element was added by Rossio and Elliott after they joined the project.

**DM:** What are the standard contractual obligations involved in writing screenplays?
**Jay:** There's a standard contract, of course. One of the most important elements is an exclusivity arrangement, which means I can't be writing another script at the same time I'm working on the commissioned one. I've never had a non-disclosure agreement, so to speak, though I'm sure they have them on movies like the most recent Star Wars installments. Another contractual term is tied to credit. As a screenwriter, if you receive sole writing credit in the film then they are obligated to do certain things. Like production bonuses. The money is also greater in terms of residuals and you get first crack at writing the sequels, or the "right of first refusal" which means I have to turn it down before they can shop it elsewhere. But these exceptions are only for scripts where I'm the *sole* writer.

**DM:** For our economically motivated readers/writers, what is the typical compensation to the writer of a screenplay? Obviously someone who's won an Oscar for best screenplay is probably treated differently.
**Jay:** Good question. Back in the early 90's minimum wage was around $50,000 for a two-hour feature. Today's minimums are more in the $60,000-65,000 range, I think. But there are other wonderful things about being a screenwriter. I mean, it's a great job. You're selling an item that everyone wants. There is a great hunger for it in the market place, unlike game shows, which I used to create. Hollywood always needs new material. Another huge benefit is that once you start doing well in the industry and prove you can satisfy people, you go up pretty quickly in terms of compensation. For me, things have gone up significantly since I wrote PIRATES. The few top screenwriters of course are making $2 million per script, and that doesn't include residuals. And the screenwriter gets paid up front! The only one in the process who does. Once you get the job, you get paid no matter what. Did I mention I love being a screenwriter?

**DM:** What is your favorite scene from PIRATES? Why?
**Jay:** Definitely the fight in the smithy between Will and Jack. My favorite movie in the world is *Scaramouche*. It has a seven-minute sword fight scene in it. The fight in the smithy was definitely my favorite scene. I'm an aficionado of sword fighting scenes.

**DM:** And what is your favorite line? (regardless of who may have written it)
**Jay:** I do have a favorite line, and I did not write it actually. It was when Jack and Elizabeth were marooned together. Jack frantically asks her why she burned all the rum. Her answer is very logical: it's a vile drink that turns civilized men into beasts, the smoke is a thousand feet high and will be seen by the fleet. To which Jack says "But why did you burn the rum?" It's a great line!

**DM:** What influence did the actors have on the script? Were any lines ad-libbed, modified based on their playing the role?
**Jay:** I don't know for sure. With COUNT, actors had profound influence on the dialogue. They are the ones that really have to say the words…with conviction…and keep it congruent with their characters' personalities. They'll frequently comment during filming, "this line is hard to say" – or – "my character just wouldn't say this." I imagine with talent like Johnny Depp and Geoffrey Rush that if they didn't like the word 'the' – it ceased to exist.

**DM:** You have a gift for character development. Each character in the movie had defined motivations for their actions (and there was a great deal of subtlety in revealing those motivations). How did you juggle all these personalities and make them distinct without losing focus of the main protagonists and antagonist?
**Jay:** That's a tough question. You see the character in your mind, get to know the character. When Disney first gave me the "treatment," Jack's character was a simply a prisoner. I saw in Jack an older Errol Flynn. Someone a little burned out, a little seedy, doing what it takes to survive. Writing a character is like putting on a suit. Putting on that costume. You inhabit him, start to act as he would. This is difficult to explain. It's like tying a knot. I can tie it, but I don't always know precisely how I did it. Some characters just fit and you write it like you were born to be that person. Others are tougher.

Let me give you another example. In COUNT, they asked me if I could make Edmond's experience in prison a little darker. So I came up with the warden character, got into his personality and motivations. He's someone turned on by incarcerating innocent people. He likes to flail his prisoners on the anniversary of their incarceration. My favorite line from the movie came from that character: The Warden tells Edmond not to bother calling on God because "God is never in France this time of year."

**DM:** This has been a great opportunity for us to interview you. What authors have had the greatest influence on you and your writing?
**Jay:** Rafael Sabatini without hesitation. He wrote *Scaramouche, Sea Hawk, Captain Blood*. Also Thomas Costain and Frank Yerby. These authors were the source of many of the movies in the 50's. I didn't love Sir Walter Scott's book as much as I loved the movie *Ivanhoe*. Same thing with *Count of Monte* Cristo. The book was not the inspiration as much because everyone wears a sword but nobody uses it.

**DM:** We like swords too.
**Jay:** I knew there was something I liked about you.

*Interviewer: Jeff Wheeler*

# The End

# The Geek's Guide to Grammar

## Parenthetical Statements in Fiction

Parenthetical elements are common in all forms of writing. But there are right, and wrong, ways to use them.

**Rule: Parenthetical elements that are closely related to the text should be set off with commas; those that are more distant to the text should be set off with dashes or parenthesis.**

Despite the above rule, however, I will at this time put a pet peeve to rest. In fiction writing, parenthesis should NEVER be used. Commas or dashes should be used, depending on how that element relates to the text.

Before going much further, a definition of a parenthetical element is in order. Basically, a parenthetical is an aside, a comment being made that is extra and not necessarily needed. Imagine it as a "by the way, did you know…" Such an element can be lifted out of a sentence without ever being missed, but its inclusion provides valuable detail to the reader. See below for some examples.

If the comment is closely related to the text, it should be set off with a comma. `The warrior, armed with his favorite sword, rode into the mountains to do battle with the trolls.` As alluded to above, one way to recognize a parenthetical element is that it can easily be removed from a sentence without affecting it. `Elsa, dressed in the black robes of mourning, wept at the death of her beloved pet, Inka the mule.`

Sometimes a parenthetical element is more distantly related to the text. In such a case, use em dashes to set it apart. `The warrior--the same man who defeated the dragon and saved the village--rode into the mountains to do battle with the trolls.` More distant parenthetical elements like the one just mentioned are generally used to put something in context with a previous event. They have little, if anything, to do with what is currently happening.

As mentioned earlier, parenthesis can also be used for distantly-related parenthetical elements. However, The Geek strongly suggests that you do not use parenthesis in fiction writing. Non-fiction and technical writings are more appropriate places for the use of parenthesis. Occasionally, first-person narrative can make use of them, but that should only be when deemed absolutely necessary. Dashes work just as well, and they are less disruptive in fiction.

### Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue. EMAIL THE GEEK

### Common mistakes:

1. The mistake we most often see is that the parenthetical element isn't caught and not set off by commas or dashes. `The warrior armed with his favorite sword set out to do battle.` This can lead to difficult reading and confusion.
2. Often, the parenthetical element has no bearing whatsoever to the story or sentence. Remove such elements. `Misty hated trudging down Beyers Canyon—identical to the mile long expanse of Breadcrumb Canyon that the ancients of Misty's land considered to be too brown to grow crops—because the cacti at the bottom always reminded her of ugly fish.`

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# THE RISE

By Sarah Dobbs

## PART TWO
## ONE

*Five seasons later*

Happy Birthday Markooth," Gwyneth sang, a little drunk off the stolen ale. She leaned across Davvy to plant a big kiss on his mouth. Markooth couldn't help but smile.

"Why thank you, Gwyneth."

Ry-anne looked into the small fire they had built by the lake. Crickets trilled nearby. She warmed her hands on the flickering orange-red flames, not because of the night chill, but because Gwyneth's actions made her uncomfortable. At fifteen, Gwyneth shouldn't be kissing. Then again, she always did what she wanted.

**She screamed till her throat was raw and swam violently out of the dream before she drowned. Markooth shook her—she batted him away.**

But jealousy was a sin in Glandor, so Ry-anne tried to push her feelings away—and then Davvy glanced her way. His fleeting half-smile tried to tell her that Gwyneth's flirting with Markooth didn't bother him, but he wasn't very convincing.

"So how does it feel to be all grown up and going to work next morn?" Davvy asked.

Markooth rubbed his thumb over the rim of the clay mug he cupped with both hands. Longish, sunny hair fell over clear eyes and Ry-anne was disturbed to find herself watching the flames dance over his handsome face, causing his golden eyes to flash. She subdued an overwhelming urge to brush the hair from his cheek.

"So it must be strange for you, Ry," Gwyneth said.

Ry-anne braced herself. "And how's that?"

"Well," Gwyneth wobbled backwards accidentally and shot her arms out to steady herself. "Oops. Well I mean, Markooth starts his allocation this coming morn as guard to the Grand—congratulations incidentally—yet you with your little thirteen seasons have not even been allocated your path. Just seems funny." She knocked back the dregs of ale and nearly fell onto her back.

"I'm getting allocated in three morns." Ry-anne took a teensy sip of her own drink and winced—it tasted just awful. She hated when people brought up their age difference. It reminded her of when their Immediates had tried to get them separated. And Kyna…little curl-twisting Kyna. Ry-anne squeezed the memories away—they were too much for tonight. Though if she had been alive, she would have been here with them, wouldn't she? Little Kyna.

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# Procyx Book Three

By O.R. Savage

## The Holy Man
## And The Infidel

## Prologue
## Dark Foundation

A human-sized flat, vertical vortex unraveled mere centimeters above the surface of a pernicious, slumbering world. The blue, coherent light from its swirling flames had not shone here for aeons and set a small turbulence rippling across nearby stretches of darkened membrane.

The solitary figure that stepped through the eye of the blue swirl didn't care that he had disturbed the viscous pool, standing on it but not sinking in. The swirl closed behind him and evaporated, plunging him into the perpetual darkness of intergalactic night. Beneath him the membrane trembled in several, rhythmic throbs.

"Yes, yes, yes" the man knelt down, peering into the gelatinous ooze. "I have again set foot on Focus Seven. Wake, and serve me, for I am one of the true Gods."

It would take a time for the "help" to stir. He waited, surveying the sky.

**We have no power that can stand against the Golden Death. No one does.**

The galaxy shone from thousands of light-years away, a smudge of luminous down covering thirty degrees of the otherwise pitch heavens. The man smiled as he searched for Procyx, that tear in dimensions which other eyes here could not see for thousands of years yet. He found it at last--a sparkle at the edge of the galaxy twinkling in the same blue coherence as the vortex's flames that had brought him here. "EndStar of Grief," he muttered. "You have no idea! It is but the dawn of grief!"

The membrane quivered. He looked down and saw a siren shivering in the gloom. One of her heads turned toward him. It grinned its razor teeth hungrily until recognition dawned and quickly averted its eyes.

The man frowned, deciding whether to let it live for its insolence. No, best set an example. He reached down through the membrane to where its fluid ran like oil, took the offending head by the neck and snapped it. The rest of the siren flailed in panic, and its banshee's cry gurgled up from the remaining head as it plunged away into some remote depths to die. The man stood again, walking casually toward the edge of one of millions of road-ramps leading up from the membrane toward a Portal generator. Once he had stepped onto the ramp's meaty surface, the membrane behind liquefied and would do so all across the planet now.

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throne. “And such inept dancing is an insult to your Queen! Rise, and be gone from this court!”

The Queen gave three sharp claps. As if materializing from the air, two sentries in polished armor appeared on either side of the ballerina so suddenly that Fizzbain heard several ladies in the crowd stifle their gasps. Elisabetta did not look at either of the guards; instead she kept her head bowed low as she walked the long aisle with them from the great hall. The guards flanked her like two metal behemoths while their booted footsteps reverberated throughout the court. Although the girl’s steps faltered, neither soldier attempted to assist her. The great doors slammed shut behind them, echoing throughout the palace court like the roar of angry dragons.

The Queen looked down at the jester still crouched at her feet and whispered to him as if the incident with the girl had never happened. Had she thought to look, she would have noticed the clown’s two clenched fists, fists he would have gladly unclenched to wrap around the Queen’s throat, would doing so enable him to rescue Elisabetta. But such intrepidity would have been foolish even for a man who wore the cap and bells.

“And now, Fizzbain, perhaps my little fool may help erase this atmosphere of gloom with a bit of merriment? Come, make us laugh!” From the way Drucilla spoke, one might have believed the Queen of Hampstead had given her fool a choice.

Fizzbain swallowed his anguish and feverishly sorted through his repertoire of tricks appropriate for the occasion, knowing that a poor performance meant that he also might leave the Queen’s court this evening flanked by two sentries, later joining Elisabetta somewhere in the bowels of the castle’s dungeon-keep.

A song perhaps, some frivolous little melody meant to tickle the spirits of the lords and ladies of the court and fill the halls with roars of laughter? But one discordant note might remind his Queen of the embarrassment of Elisabetta’s poor dancing, and the selection of a proper tune was always a tricky business, for Drucilla was not a great lover of music.

Then perhaps some acrobatics; maybe a bit of expert juggling and spinning of dinnerware guaranteed to please the whole assembly? But suppose he dropped one of the spinning plates? Suppose in the midst of a somersault the jester miscalculated and landed ridiculously on his posterior? Ah, but that was precisely what a fool did! Might Fizzbain not be allowed some inexpertness precisely because of the capacity of his service?

On any ordinary evening he might, but not following on the heels—or more precisely, the broken ankle—of the unfortunate Elisabetta. The crowd of nobles waited in polite silence for the jester to begin, but the idea stubbornly would not come to him.

Think! By all that is holy, let not inspiration fail me!

Think!

The idea hit the jester with the strength of a thunderbolt. Days earlier, Fizzbain had spent a cold and rain-swept evening in the hut of Goffredo the wizard, renowned throughout England for his potions and spells. The old mystic had found the little man in motley amusing, and while not given to disclosing his more precious secrets of sorcery, Goffredo was not unreasonable when it came to sharing a parlor trick or two.

“Be ye familiar with the ancient art of transcendent sleep?” the mystic had asked the little clown, whose bells tinkled as he shook his head that he was not. “Then pay heed, my little friend, for I shall teach a trick guaranteed to capture the imagination of even the most cynical among the Queen’s audience...”

The wizard induced a trance upon the jester, some mystical manner of waking sleep that enabled the Fool to bleat like a sheep and growl like a lion, although Fizzbain had never recalled having the ability to do either. When he awoke with the memory of this fully intact he had only

two words for Goffredo.

"Show me!" he pleaded.

And show him the wizard did.

Now the time had arrived for Fizzbain to show his Queen.

"A subject! I require a subject from among the noble lords and fair ladies of the court!" the jester cried to the assembly. "Now let me see..." The little clown wandered among the crowd, taunting and tantalizing the gentry playfully, stopping at a member of the assembly and staring long and hard, as if pondering the person's suitability.

"Perhaps—you?" he suggested to Lord Alfred, a rotund and jolly hunting companion of the King, whose ribald witticisms left something to be desired among the more demure ladies. "Or maybe—you?" he suggested to Lady Esmerelda, the Duchess of Falmouth, a particularly ugly and skinny woman with a large wart on the tip of her nose, who would have made a poor subject for the company of noblemen with still-unimpaired vision. Spinning dramatically around to Lady Anne, the beautiful and amply endowed young daughter of the Duke of Salem, the jester cried out, "You!" Now here was a subject certain to catch the eyes of the gentlemen and the curiosity of the ladies.

The girl squealed with delight, just as Fizzbain had expected she would. He held his fool's scepter before the girl's eyes.

"Do you see the doll's head of the little fool that sits atop my wand?" he asked Lady Anne. "I want you to watch him...I want you to watch that little fool...watch him...watch him..."

As he spoke he waved the scepter slowly until he saw the girl's lids grow heavy and drop. Goffredo's lesson had taken an instant to carry out to perfection, and Fizzbain stole a glance over his shoulder at Queen Drucilla in the certainty of receiving her approving smile.

But the clown would have preferred a Frenchman's pox to what he saw. His Queen was not amused. Instead, she wore an expression as blank as a stone's. Perhaps this transcendent sleep had not been such a good idea after all, but the jester was in this up to his chops now.

Fizzbain calculated his next move cautiously, for one walked on treacherous ground when he risked bringing even the slightest shame to any woman born of noble blood, and the Fool did not intend his Queen's affection for him to wane further. Leaning forward he whispered into Lady Anne's ear so that only she could hear.

"You are asleep, are you not, my Lady?"

"Why, of course!" she whispered back without the hint of a smile to indicate that she might be telling him less than the truth. Fizzbain licked his lips, hoping that the daughter of the Duke were still innocent enough to be unaware of the art of deceit.

"Lords and ladies!" he addressed the court. "I give you a beautiful young noblewoman who, for the next several minutes at least, will have fallen hopelessly in love with a simple Fool—That is myself, your humble servant." He turned to Lady Anne and spoke to her. "When you awaken and hear me say 'Alas, my love!' you shall throw your arms about me and declare your everlasting love for me! And now, my Lady shall awaken when she hears me snap my fingers...like so!"

The young girl's eyes flickered open, and blushing she looked 'round as if confused. "I-I believe—I must have fallen asleep!" she stammered with modest embarrassment befitting her rank. "I—I—please forgive me, but I—"

The assembly howled, and the girl's face reddened even more.

Reaching for his lyre Fizzbain added, "I have a song to sing for you, Lady Anne. Your beauty has touched my heart and inspired the muse within me." He paused and, winking at the

assembly, began.

"Alas, my love, you have done me wrong to cast me out discourteously..."

Lady Anne's face reddened, but this time not with the blush of girlish embarrassment. Hunger came into her eyes. Her bosom heaved. She licked her lips, removing a silk handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbing it against her brow as if suddenly overtaken with heat. The girl's expression changed to that of a woman on fire whose desires had overtaken her reason. Unable to restrain herself, she threw her arms around the jester and covered his face with kisses, making the awkward puckering sounds of one completely unfamiliar with the art of adult lovemaking.

"Oh, Fizzbain! I shall love you forever!" she moaned.

"Alas, my love, and so you shall!" the jester repeated with a wide grin, and the girl's entire body suddenly heaved in a most peculiar fashion. She threw herself directly upon him.

When the jester snapped his fingers again the girl stopped her kisses cold. Shaking herself as if from a deep sleep, Lady Anne turned to the assembly in confusion and, realizing her arms remained tangled around the little clown, she released him with a shove.

"It appears a young maid's 'forever' arrives much sooner than a Fool might have wished," spoke the jester with a shrug.

Thunderous laughter filled the hall, followed by even more thunderous applause. Fizzbain bowed to his audience, bowed to Lady Anne, then turned to his Queen. Surely now the smile would be upon her face.

But with one look at her the Fool's eyes bulged like an insect's, and the lyre fell from his hands.

There sat his Queen licking her lips in the same manner as the girl had, her complexion even more flushed, the hunger in her eyes bordering on ravenous. One look at her face explained it all to Fizzbain. In watching him perform the wizard's trick, somehow Drucilla had herself fallen under the spell of the jester's transcendent sleep!

"Oh, Fizzbain," she began. "I too shall—"

Interrupting before anyone in the assembly might complete the Queen's sentence for her, the Fool snapped his fingers behind his back so that only his Queen might hear. Nothing happened. He snapped again, this time harder. Nothing still. If anything, the look of hunger in the Queen's eyes had grown even more intense.

"Oh, my sweet Fizzbain—"

The Fool reacted with the swiftness of a hunted rabbit. He scampered down the center aisle to divert his audience from the throne, and clapping his hands three times, cried out, "Servants! Food servers! The Queen's banquet begins!"

Drucilla said nothing to contradict him, and her silence served as corroboration of the jester's announcement. The assembly of lords and ladies filed from the great hall still laughing at the evening's entertainment, mercifully oblivious to the sight of royalty melting behind them in the hot juices of her passion.

When the great court had emptied, Fizzbain approached the throne. He looked up at Drucilla. Again he snapped his fingers, this time right under her nose.

"My Queen?" he asked.

"My love," she responded.

* * *

Hours past midnight the Queen called out, "Fizzbain! Fizzbain!" from her sleeping

chamber, causing the Fool to wish he had joined the King at the Crusades in battling the Norman army rather than listen to the woman's shrieks. Once certain that sleep had overtaken her, he took to his horse in the dead of night and rode to the very outskirts of Hampstead, to the sorcerer's dwelling. If the Queen's spell had worn off by morning, instead of calling for him, Fizzbain feared Drucilla would be calling for his head.

And what if the spell did not wear off? What if Drucilla's love spread through her heart like a malignancy? That was a possibility too horrible to consider.

Fizzbain crouched inside Goffredo's hut, miserable and shivering despite the sorcerer's hearth fire. "Either way, I am a dead man!" the Fool moaned to the old sorcerer. "And it is you who have made me so!"

"And what of the poor ballerina Elisabetta?" Goffredo asked simply, his face illuminated by the crackling flames.

"Elisabetta?" asked Fizzbain. Shame touched his heart like a hot poker. In his own torment he had forgotten hers. "Why—why, she will probably spend a few nights in the dungeon accompanied by the rats and then be banished from Hampstead. Oh, I deserve the full measure of my fate for having forgotten her! My companions should be the worms when this has ended!"

"Perhaps that may be," mused Goffredo. "But you will have learned much before that occurs, my friend. Tell me, have you not asked yourself why the Lady Anne did not remain under the same spell as your Queen?"

In fact, Fizzbain had not asked himself. The jester looked at the sorcerer and frowned like a schoolboy at his books. "Is it for the same reason I had forgotten about poor Elisabetta? Does affection's magic spell break so easily?"

The wizard smiled at the words of the fool, for some things are better explained through wisdom than through magic.

"You are learning, my little friend. One does not often place his own heart second. No wizard's magic could make the Lady Anne's love last longer than the duration of a few sighs, for frivolity is the province of young girls. The Queen is another matter. Her beauty is a vague memory to her, and her heart demands the passion denied it. The mere snap of your fingers cannot break a spell that Drucilla's heart, for its own sake, does not wish broken."

Fizzbain fell to his knees. "Then I am surely a dead man! For bringing her such disgrace the Queen shall serve my codpiece to the wolves while I am still in it! Worse, she may eat it herself!"

"Perhaps," the wizard considered. "But like the Queen's passion, your concern for the little ballerina has not vanished so quickly either, and your affection required no sorcerer's trick. The Queen's remedy we can find. I am not so certain about yours." He removed a vial from among many on his shelf and sniffed the murky contents, making certain he had selected the correct potion. He handed the vial to the jester.

"More of your wizardry?" Fizzbain sneered.

"An antidote," spoke Goffredo. "Every sickness has its cure, and the Queen's love is a fever feeding on itself. Once the Queen drinks this she will remember nothing, save the excellent performance of her especial jester this past evening. Drucilla will be as you remember her."

Fizzbain considered this, weighing the Queen's former temperament against her present ardor. Neither choice was especially pleasant.

"She will not call out my name in the night?" the jester asked.

"Only when she wishes to laugh," Goffredo replied.

The Fool's brain went immediately to work. He pictured the steaming pot of tea the

Queen's chambermaid, Emma, brought to Drucilla every morning at first daylight. The deed would not be difficult to accomplish. He grasped the vial and stuffed it into his shirt. Preparing to leave, he turned to the wizard.

"Answer me this, Goffredo. Is there anything that might go amiss with this potion, similar to your trick of transcendent sleep? Will you make room for my head on that shelf with your various brews, should the Queen drink this and moments later transform into a giant newt?"

The wizard laughed heartily. It had always been the sad fate of the Fool that even a sorcerer could not recognize when he was perfectly serious.

Fizzbain returned to the castle with the speed of a man possessed by demons. He had much to do before dawn's light, but one task demanded precedence. The jester visited the dungeon, for he had determined not to allow the ballerina one more minute in that dank, rat-infested place. The Fool doubted little that his life would not be worth a ha'penny when this was over. Such heroics come easily to one with nothing to lose.

The prison guard was fast asleep, just as the jester had expected, and fortunately Fizzbain needed no explanations to search the darkness for the girl. There were few empty cells in the bowels of the palace, for the Queen took offense easily and punished frequently.

During a night filled with bewilderment, there remained one more as Fizzbain held up his lantern to each stinking compartment.

Elisabetta was not in any of them.

He would ask Drucilla about the ballerina the moment the Queen had taken her tea, but now that same tea required the Fool's full attention. He hastened to the door of the royal bed chamber, dreading the first words the woman within might utter when she awakened. Hearing her cry "Fizzbain! Where is Fizzbain?" he ground his palms into his ears.

The chambermaid arrived with the tea kettle. As the Queen's wails for her jester persisted, Emma stared at the cringing clown as if expecting an explanation.

"All night long the Queen calls for you," the maidservant replied. "And now she rises with your name on her lips? Fool, logic seems to have deserted this place."

Fizzbain sneered back at her. "What does a Fool know of logic?" Something over the girl's shoulder seemed to suddenly catch his attention, and a smile smeared across his face. "Why, Emma. Is that Tom the cook I see at the staircase with his eye on you?" As the chambermaid turned to look, Fizzbain poured the wizard's potion into the tea pot.

"Cook? I see no cook," replied Emma, but when she turned back to the jester he was gone.

Fizzbain lingered beneath the staircase waiting for the maidservant to leave, then carefully entered the royal chamber. Drucilla sat upright in her bed about to sip her first cup of tea, but noticing him at the door she put down the cup and smiled in a way that threatened to crack the dried flesh of her face.

"You have come to me!" she cried, hardly able to contain her joy. "Come, Fizzbain, sit here beside your Queen. I have something to tell you that is so very sad." This she said without the smile leaving her lips.

The jester sat beside her, staring at the canopy above him so as not to look into her smiling face. Hearing her sip the tea Fizzbain grinned at the slurping sounds she made.

"Do you remember that silly girl last evening, that clumsy ballerina who made such a fool

of herself during last night's gathering?" she asked.

Sip.

Fizzbain scratched his head as if trying to remember, pretending that a Fool's brain had little room for such detail. His heart raced with a stallion's fury, but his face revealed nothing.

"Well, it is no matter," continued the Queen. "For, you see, unable to sleep last night and filled with love for you, I visited the dungeon-keep and ordered the guards to release her at once. I told the girl it was my love for a Fool that had induced my foolish heart to display mercy, for I saw how you enjoyed her dancing last night, incompetent as it was. The poor girl cried out your name that same moment. Why, I would swear the dancer's love for you had equaled my own!"

Sip.

And another sip.

"You—you released her?" the jester asked, disbelieving this stroke of fortune, but careful not to smile. "Your show of mercy is sad news indeed, my Queen. Perhaps if you remain in bed it shall pass."

The Queen's next few sips were loud, and hardly displayed royalty. She reached for the little clown, clutching him so tightly his bells played a symphony in her bed.

"No, no, poor Fool!" the Queen cried with a curious mixture of emotions impossible to define. "It is not the girl's story that is sad. It is yours! My irrational behavior last night is the cost of love! I know not why I feel such love for a Fool; I know only that I do. And as long as I feel this foolish love, such behavior will continue! I shall be laughed immediately out of my kingdom, if I am not first beheaded by the King. Fizzbain, this I can never permit."

The Queen pulled the jester even closer to her so that their faces nearly touched. Fizzbain could not tell whether the fires of passion or rage burned in her eyes as she spoke.

"Immediately following last night's fete I spoke to the headman. I ordered the garrotter to remove your head the moment you leave my chamber. That is the reason I called out your name throughout the night. I am afraid that the cost of reclaiming my dignity must be your head!"

"My head?" he asked. "It is a foolish head, filled with foolish thoughts! Why would you want a fool's head?"

"In exchange for a queen's heart."

Fizzbain pulled himself free. Unable to speak, he tried to think. But the Queen's words were a hall of mirrors. By loving a fool she had become a fool herself. She had shown mercy and she despised the weakness in herself for having shown it.

She loved him, and she hated herself for loving him!

Like cheap pottery these thoughts rattled inside the jester's head, a head that soon would lie inside the executioner's straw basket. But there was something he had momentarily forgotten. Something important that Fizzbain had overlooked...

Her love for him had also set Elisabetta free!

And something else, something else...

The tea!

Suddenly the Queen's eyes rolled inside her head, her body shook, and the tea cup spilled from her hand. The wizard's brew had finally taken its hold! Perhaps there was hope that the headman's basket might remain empty this morning. He watched Drucilla convulse for many moments until, beaded with sweat, she turned to him as if awakening from a deep sleep.

"My Queen?" he asked.

"My fool!" she responded, and swung her head about as if shaking off cobwebs. "What a fever I have had. And such dreams! I could swear I had spoken to the headman about the matter

of removing your head this very morning!"

"And why might a queen desire a fool's head?" asked Fizzbain, repeating his former question, but the queen's flushed face and averted eyes suggested this part of her dream she did not wish to share.

Fortune had again smiled upon Fizzbain. But Fortune still required a little help from him.

The jester uttered a convincing moan. "Well, this may have been a dream to you, perhaps, but not to the garrotter who sharpens his axe even as we speak! He knows not that the words you uttered were not the words of his waking Queen who, while in her sleep, spoke to the man last night!"

The Queen struggled to remember the strange dream, but already her memory had clouded, just as Goffredo had said. She spoke almost apologetically.

"I will see to it, Fizzbain. Call for the garrotter at once, and I will tell him there shall be no fools beheaded this morning."

Before the woman had completed her sentence the jester had already catapulted himself halfway to the door. Miraculously, the world had managed to set itself right.

Reaching for her stately robes and the jeweled crown Drucilla kept alongside her bed, she stood before the mirror to ascertain the image of a queen reflected in the glass. While she reconstructed a semblance of royalty to her face, the mirror image seemed to stir another memory of her dream.

"Fizzbain, wait!" she cried, spinning around to face him. "You must also call for the prison guards. I must undo another imprudent act at once!"

The jester stopped himself cold at the half-open door, and turned to hear more of his Queen's command.

"Such a world we inhabit when we sleep!" she snapped at him, displaying the familiar irritability the jester had known so well. "In my sleep-walk to the dungeon I foolishly released the ballerina last night! It is ill-befitting for a Queen to show mercy when insulted. I must inform my guards to comb Hampstead for that girl, and when they bring her here I shall have her broken ankle cut off! Her graceless dancing shall never again offend this kingdom!"

The jester closed the door of the bed chamber and watched the Queen busying herself at her mirror. She was again his Queen, he was again her fool, and Elisabetta...

He pictured Elisabetta's eyes wet with tears, her face contorted in pain. And he pictured her crying out his name in her dark cell.

*Why, I would swear the dancer's love for you had equaled my own*, Drucilla had said. But that was incorrect. Elisabetta's love had required no sorcerer's trick.

Nor had his.

"You were right, Goffredo," Fizzbain muttered to himself, clenching his fists. "I have learned much..."

Without a word he approached Drucilla, noticing her bejeweled scepter as it lay in its golden case upon the Queen's dressing table. Removing it, he caressed the wand in his hands. He touched the Queen's shoulder with it, and she turned to him.

"Why, Fizzbain, what is that you're doing with my—?"

Fizzbain smiled at his Queen like a dutiful servant.

"Your majesty, I request only a moment of your time for a little trick I have learned. Now, if you will just watch this red stone that rests atop your royal scepter...just watch...watch...for only a moment longer, because I would like to sing you this little song..."

Fizzbain sang quickly. He did not want to keep the Queen's executioner waiting.

# The End

*Ken Goldman (Kenneth C. Goldman), spends his summers in Margate City on the South Jersey shore, and his winters in Lower Bucks County, PA. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Education and a Masters Degree in Counseling/Education. He is a retired high school English and Film Studies teacher. His other publications include over 300 small press publications in the U.S., Canada, U.K., Ireland, and Australia. You can find out more about him on his website, www.authorsden.com/kennethcgoldman. Of* The Queen Is Not Amused*, he says, "Unrequited love. Yeah, been there, done that. Who hasn't? The most tragic hero is the little guy like Fizzbain, a fool in the eyes of the world, who makes the ultimate sacrifice that no one knows about. And yes, I've been there and done that, too! At least as an author I get the chance to write about it."*

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"Somethin'...got into the garbage." They were having breakfast, and he was spooning applesauce over his eggs and not listening.

"What?"

"Garbage pails...spilled. Coons, I guess."

"Did you leave the lid up?" As he said it, he remembered the dull thud the plywood top always made as it slammed down on the box that held the two white five-gallon pails. He was sure he had heard it last night.

"No." There was a pause as she tried to talk around a half-frozen mouth. "The tops were...off...were clean, like I'd washed 'em."

That got his attention. Emma cleaned like a brain surgeon's nurse. Since her stroke, that was about all she did except stare at her catalogs. Pushing his breakfast aside, he went out the back door. There they were, lying on their sides, as spotless as the day he had brought them back from the salvage yard. The lid to the box was hanging by one hinge. *Raccoons…well maybe*. He couldn't remember the last one he'd seen. There were no tracks or any other signs he could read. He put the tops on the buckets, set them in the box and replaced the lid. He made a mental note to refasten the hinge and went back to his breakfast.

He had stored and forgotten a lot of mental notes, and as Emma scrubbed the morning dishes, she began to parade them out like long-lost friends. "Back porch light's out...there's a drip under...and along with the loose board..." She had been mumbling the same list every morning for a while now. This morning it was more than he could take.

"I need to check on the bees." He walked out the back door and into the walnut orchard. It was a place of solace. The spring grasses were starting to die now, and they brushed his hands with heavy seeds. Next week a tractor would disc it all up to reduce the summer fire hazard. Reaching up, he took his pith helmet and bee veil from the crotch of a tree. He slipped his head through the netting and into the helmet. Protected, he glanced up to where his four hives sat on tires at the edge of the orchard. He had them facing the morning sun so the field bees would get an early start. This morning there were only three.

For a moment, he was confused and had to count again. Then he saw the fourth. It was scattered over the ground, bits and pieces here and there. Broken bottom board, a hive body pushed out of shape and frames strewn everywhere. The shock numbed him and his stomach turned over. His first thought was neighbor boys or raccoons, but he knew better. Whoever had done this was well protected or could stand a lot of pain.

He was just thinking bear when he was stung on the hand. The bees were still riled up, and he walked to the side of the barn where he stashed his smoker. He swung back the rusty top, stuffed in an old rag, and lit it. Working the bellows, he watched the spout until white smoke poured out. From the back of the hives, he reached around to the entrance of each one and gave them a good puff. When the bees calmed down, he examined the wreckage.

There wasn't anything he could salvage. He found a few clusters of dead bees in the trampled grass. Some of the broken frames still had wires attached, coiling up to glitter in the sun. He came across small pieces of dark wax, but the beautiful drawn comb, full of brood and honey, was gone. In forty years of keeping bees, nothing like this had ever happened. A splintered top bar had a line of puncture marks on one side. Teeth, big teeth, had to be a bear, but he had never heard of one this far from the mountains.

Back in the house, he got out the county phone book and dialed the Ag Commissioner's office. He was transferred twice before he got the man he wanted.

"Ed Wynn here."

"You the county trapper?"

"That's right."

"This is Ray Simms. I live over on Las Gallinas Road near the park, and I got an animal I need trapped."

"What's the problem?"

"A bear got one of my bee hives."

"A bear! No bears in Ayacamas County."

"That's what I thought, but this hive's been smashed to pieces. I got a top bar with tooth marks on it. Big ones." There was a long silence on the other end.

"Look, I'm trapping wild pigs near Meadow Brook golf course and I gotta check my snares. I can swing by your place late this mornin'. Bet you got a couple of big old coons."

I'll be here." He gave directions and hung up. Emma was trying to read something, so he sat on the porch and waited.

Ed drove up in an oversized pickup truck with fat tires and a full gun rack. "Hey, you're not so easy to find. Where's your hive at?" The trapper wore khakis with an Ayacama County patch on one shoulder. Ray didn't like the looks of him. He was tall and heavy-set with a belly hanging over a flashy silver buckle. His face was a hundred miles of bad road framed with a buzz cut and aviation glasses. After a hard handshake, Ray led him back to the walnut orchard.

"Pigs make a mess out of a golf course and the golfers want the county to help them out. I've snared five this month and they're still complaining. We only got one trapper now. Used to be four of us when we was going after coyotes. Hell, you gotta have a permit to do anything now."

Ray finally entered the conversation by pointing ahead. "Just to the right of those three hives. Don't worry about the bees, they're plenty busy with the blackberry flow."

The trapper grunted. "Now, coons can do more damage than people think. I killed one last week over near the coast, musta weighed fifty pounds. Now a animal like that…" His words died away as he took in the destruction. He knelt down and examined the splintered frames, the squashed hive bodies and the broken lid. He searched the ground.

Ray watched, smiling to himself. *Arrogant bastard, how long is it going to take before he admits he was wrong?* "I got a top bar here with some marks on it." He held it out to the trapper who reluctantly took it. He studied it for long time and made a big show of measuring the puncture marks.

"Well…guess it is a bear." He was quiet, turning the top bar over in his hands. "Go about three hundred pounds by the size of the marks." But his voice lacked confidence.

"Figured it wasn't something any raccoon could do." Ray couldn't help himself.

The trapper ignored the remark and kept staring at the piece of wood in his hand.

Ray could see something was bothering him. "Ever trap a bear?"

"Oh yeah, plenty of times." He seemed to break away from a trance. "Look, here's what we'll do. I got a couple of dogs that'll tree that bear in a flash. I'll come over first thing in the morning. It being Saturday, I'll do it on my own time, easier that way."

Ray hesitated, trying to think it through. "All right. Can I come along?"

"Sure, but it might be hard to keep up."

"I'll manage."

The trapper looked up the gentle slope, past the walnuts and into the oaks. "How far do the trees go?"

"Not too far, maybe quarter of a mile and then its all chaparral. BLM land."

"Piece of cake, he'll stay in the trees, and that's where we'll get him."

Ray had to ask. "What are you going to do when he's treed?"

"Depends on how big and mean he is." He was still looking at the bar with the tooth marks. "Must of come down from Ridge County. It's happened before, long time ago. He won't stay long, nothing for a bear to eat around here. Better put a fence around those hives, he could be back tonight."

They were at the pickup now. "See you early, say six, get it over with before the day gets hot." The truck roared to life and he drove off.

*A fence, Jesus Christ, he didn't know much. You can't keep a bear out of hives once they got a taste. Not even an electric fence would do it.*

After diner, he and Emma sat on the front porch. They rocked and talked, or he did and she tried. Then she couldn't stop yawning, so he helped her to bed. Making sure she was asleep, he searched the house until he found a working flashlight. He took an old pad and a sleeping bag and made a bed in the orchard where he had a clear view of his hives. He was glad tick season was over.

In the barn, he took down an ancient double-barreled shotgun. Rummaging in a cabinet, he came up with shells. He hesitated before putting birdshot in the right barrel and double O buckshot in the other. *Scare him off with the light stuff and if there is trouble, I've got some serious lead.* He took along some extra shells.

It had been a long day and he fell asleep easily. Moonlight woke him and he sat up. Looking around he saw the hives, dim square columns in the leafy shadows of a walnut tree. The world was at peace, bathed in soft cool light, no sounds except crickets. *This is silly. He's not coming back; I should go on in.* Emma could take care of herself, but if she woke to find him gone, she might worry. It was so soothing out here. He lay back down and dozed off.

He woke with a start to a loud noise. His heart raced and he fought to calm himself. He reached for the gun and the light and came up with neither. There was a dark shape moving between two of the hives. Now he had the gun in his hands and, clicking off the safe, made ready to shoot.

"Get out of here!" His voice crashed against the darkness and scared him even more. The shape instantly was larger, as if standing up. He tried to aim but it was a halfhearted attempt and he was reluctant to pull the trigger. The form changed again and sped away. Ray blinked. He had seen bears in Idaho and knew they were fast and silent, but that had been just a little too fast. There was something else. He couldn't understand what he had seen just as the bear disappeared. It was as if the bear wore a big hat. A hat like he might wear. *Must have been the moonlight*, and indeed, the orchard was lit with an eerie glow.

*No use trying to sleep now.* He stood up, slipped on his boots, and took the shotgun back to the barn. The moon was overhead and there was a hint of dawn in the east as he carried the bedding to the house. By the time Emma woke, he had breakfast started. She moved awkwardly around the kitchen until he pulled her close and nuzzled the back of her neck. She tilted her head and giggled deep in her throat.

"How did you sleep?"

She didn't answer.

*Oh, what I would give to see her smile again.*

Ed Wynn was half an hour late and Ray had begun to hope he wasn't going to show up.

"Listen. Here's what we'll do. The dogs will need to get the scent, then I'll turn them loose, and we'll follow. Bear should tree pretty quick, and then it's over."

"He came back."

"Really? Did you see him?"

"Only a dark shape, and then he took off, fast."

"Oh yeah, bears are fast, 'specially uphill." The trapper was dressed in camouflage from head to toe, including his hat. He wore heavy black combat boots, had a pistol on one hip, and a heavy knife on the other. Ray didn't like the looks of this at all. Taking a rifle from the truck rack, Ed walked back to the camper shell to let out his dogs.

"I thought you were going to tranquilize him."

"All depends. I got that stuff right here." He padded a shirt pocket.

Ray could see the two dogs were sorry excuses for hounds. One was hardly more than a puppy. They tried to jump up and lick his face. Ed yanked them around on a leash and they set off for the hives.

It was early and cold and the bees were not flying, so they could get close. Ed got impatient when the dogs didn't find any track. He took the chewed top bar and held it out. They sniffed it eagerly and looked up at him with innocent faces. The younger one started worrying a broken frame. Ray could see they weren't the least bit interested in chasing anything.

"Which way did he go from here?"

Ray pointed in the general direction he thought the bear had taken and the trapper dragged his dogs to the spot. They both started barking and when they were good and excited, he unsnapped their leashes. They charged off into the brush, tails wagging.

"When they really start barking that means they treed the bear." With that, the trapper took out after them. Ray hesitated. It would be a long shot for those dogs to find anything. Maybe that was good. The thought of this clown killing a bear bothered him. Should just go on home and let them exhaust themselves out there, but he had come this far, might as well see it to the end.

The switchback trail along Gallo Hill was the way to go. It was pleasant walking under the big madrones with their muscled limbs and red bark. At the top he could hear barking, and took a trail that went that way. Firs dominated the forest now, and he remembered how he and Emma used to come up here in the fall hunting mushrooms. The baying didn't change, and seemed to be going back and forth.

The sun was high and the chill out of the air when the sounds became fainter. He stopped where the trees ended and the chaparral began. Bears weren't supposed to be at home out in the open like this. He wondered if the trapper knew anything about bears at all.

He made himself comfortable in the shade, found the water bottle in his daypack and took a long drink. He lay back and, getting more comfortable, thought how good a nap would feel. A loud crack broke the stillness. He struggled up as two more shots rang out, one after the other so fast he couldn't count them. The sound echoed away across the hills and finally died out. *Damn trapper had always intended to kill the animal. But what would he do with it?* Ray had to go see. He put on his straw hat and took the best path in the direction the shots had come from.

The trail was rough and brush tore at his clothes, but he knew exactly where he was. A little farther and he would be able see down to where his gravel drive snaked away from the highway. In less than an hour, he reached Nightjar Ridge. A wind came up, cooling the back of his neck. He thought to yell, but stopped and listened instead. It was quiet. Chaparral as far as he could see, no trapper, no dogs, and certainly no bear. The wind stirred the brush around him. Admiring the view, he noticed a big patch of chaparral that the wind didn't move. A half-acre block was frozen, like a painting. He stared and the form gelled into three spires, jutting like needles from a giant pincushion. He couldn't figure out what he was seeing.

A blast knocked him to the ground. Leaves and small branches pelted him, borne along

in a roar of stinging dust. A crushing sound forced him to cover his ears and curl into a ball. The noise rose in pitch until it was a sky full of screams.

When it went away, it took his breath and he writhed, gasping for air. *I must be having a heart attack, or some kind of stoke. What a terrible thing, to die like this on a fool's errand. Who will take care of Emma now?* His heart ached and his head swam until everything dimmed and went black.

He was aware of creaking sounds. He pushed to sit up and then realized he was breathing. With a nervous laugh, he patted his chest and ribs. He felt all right, just sore from the hard ground. *What was that noise?* It came from where the brush hadn't moved in the wind. It was all popping back up from the ground, as if a huge foot had been standing on it. One by one, some slow, others more quickly, branches were springing skyward. The chaparral was righting itself. Already a sage thrasher had moved in and was singing from a broken manzanita. There was no sign of the trapper or his dogs. The sun told him it was late and he needed to start back. Emma would be worried, and it was a long way home.

She was waiting at the door when he got to the yard. They made dinner together and he brought a bottle of wine up from the cellar. It was warm, so they ate on the porch.

"Where's th' trapper?"

"I don't know. He and the dogs got ahead of me and I never saw them again. He'll be along soon." But as he said it, he wondered.

The truck was still sitting there in the morning, so after breakfast he called the sheriff. It was Sunday, and it was almost noon before two deputies showed up. It was the same two, but they were a little more interested in this case.

"You said he started out early yesterday."

"That's right, and I followed them for a while."

"Them?"

"He had two dogs. Said he wouldn't be that long. I waited up the trail a ways and when it got late I came back."

"Did he say what he was doing?"

This was going to be a bombshell and he didn't like it. "He was chasing a bear."

The deputies looked startled. "You sure that's what he said?"

"Yep, he took a heavy rifle and a bunch of other stuff."

The young one stopped writing. "He's the County Trapper. They should have a record."

Ray didn't volunteer any more, and was thankful that the deputies had run out of questions. He kept thinking about the brush, all crunched down and then popping up. He watched as the older one got on the car radio and called for some help.

"We'll start searching as soon as the rescue team gets here. Can you show us where you last saw him?"

"Sure, that's easy."

Ray led them through the orchard, giving the hives a wide berth. "Right here is where he turned the dogs loose. After they got to barking pretty good, he took off after them." They thanked him and disappeared into the trees.

He woke in the night when they came back down, and he heard their vehicles drive off. In the morning, the trapper's truck was still there. The search team returned when he and Emma were eating breakfast. They sat on the porch and watched. They could hear a helicopter flying back and forth. This went on for three days, and then someone towed away the big pickup. They saw it on the news; Ed Wynn, veteran county trapper, vanishes without a trace.

A few days later, Ray opened the door to the barn and stumbled right into his welding rig. When he got over the shock and the pain of a bruised shin, he realized he hadn't been in here since the morning he put the shotgun away. Out of curiosity, he opened the valves and checked the gas levels. Someone had used half the acetylene and nearly all the oxygen.

On the work bench, neatly laid out, were the pliers, the wrench, the ball peen hammer and the three screwdrivers. The silver solder and brazing rods were missing. Somebody had done a repair job with his tools and returned them.

The tools were cleaner than he ever kept them. In the tray on the welding cart, he saw the striker and goggles, as well as the extra tips. Something else was there too. Something he had never seen before. It was like a big clamshell, or maybe a simple rose without a center. It was beautifully fluted and gleamed like bright copper. He picked it up. It was cool to the touch and rested easily in the palm of his hand. Made of some kind of metal, but he couldn't guess what. He had an urge to listen to it. Pressed over his ear, it roared like the ocean. *Just like a real seashell. Emma would like this.*

"Look what I found out in the barn. Do you remember this from anywhere?"

"No..." Emma held it, cupped in both hands.

They placed the bright metallic shell in the middle of the kitchen table where a vase of flowers usually sat. It was a pretty thing. Ray liked the way it caught the sunlight and bounced it around the room, like reflections off a lake. It seemed to glow long after the sun was gone. Several times, he came in to find Emma sitting at the table staring at it. Good as a catalog, he thought. Then she began to listen to it too.

Two weeks later, he noticed his left shoulder wasn't hurting, even after weeding the garden. Coming into the house, dinner was already on the table. That hadn't happened in a while. He washed up and sat down.

"Ray, I need you to fix the loose board on the back steps. It's dangerous going out that way with a load of wash."

Looking up, Emma's smile flooded over him. He dropped his fork and started to cry.

# The End

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Mohd'Athon. He smirked, confident that he could take any of them. Occasionally, he even considered challenging some of the Dor'Athon. Most Mohd'Athon would not think of such foolishness, but most lacked skill and ambition and would be happy to follow the Dor'Athon for the length of their lives. Thytr would lead. To do that, the law was clear. Any Dor'Athon defeated in battle by a Mohd'Athon would relinquish his position. The Dor'Athon had little to fear from most Mohd'Athon. They were all shardsmen, and would all live until their lives were cut short, but the youngers were babies of less than a half century. The Dor'Athon rode the Southlands with a millennium of life behind them and all of the lessons time taught. Yet, Thytr marked the Dor'Athon in camp and watched them. There was always something he could learn.

"Nice movements, Thytr," Laramis said with a nod. Laramis had the kind of presence that made weak men look away. Thytr was not a weak man, and he still wanted to look away. Laramis was tall and broad-shouldered; his leathers shone like onyx, and a golden moon crested the hilt of his blackshard, signifying his rank of undergeneral. Thytr mused that if all Dor'Athon carried themselves with the pride that Laramis bore, the wars would turn out differently this time. "Go wash the blood and sand off your face," Laramis ordered Jerly, not even honoring him by using his name.

Jerly struggled to his feet and ran toward the tents.

"Any news on Kijin?" Thytr longed to see the legend, to see him train and instruct.

Laramis' smile receded. "No, but he'll be here within the fortnight. I suppose his name still draws the Mohd'Athon."

Thytr's cheeks flushed. He wished he had not been so anxious. His patience and savvy were no match for his skill with the blackshard, but he would learn. "I meant nothing disrespectful. We are well trained under your eye…"

The smile returned, but stopped before it reached Laramis' eyes. "It's understandable, and you've given me no offense. Were I a Mohd'Athon, I'd want to see the hero with my own eyes. I'd want to see if the man lived up to the legend. You'll have your chance soon enough."

Thytr sheathed his blackshard. "I have no doubt that he will exceed expectation, Dor' Laramis." Thytr hoped his doubt was not apparent but, until then, only Laramis lived up to the reputation of a Dor'Athon Shardsman. Some were soft, others seemed weak, and most had a lazy look in their eyes. "Will you or another older train tonight? Dor' Altinon's session on counterstrikes was outstanding last night."

"Yes, I saw you use the Higbert Sweep to flatten Jerly. Your execution was very solid. But, walk with me and I'll tell you of a different plan for tonight." Laramis gave Thytr a look full of promise and guile. Thytr followed to the edge of the training grounds and beyond.

* * *

Small parchment lanterns hung on poles in the ground, surrounding the mound at the center of the valley. Thousands of stars glinted in the velvet sky. The heat of the day had slipped away, replaced by a sobering chill. Excited talk about what would happen that night rumbled into the silence of the night. In front of the group of Mohd'Athon lay ten square-hewn sandstones. Behind the stones, the Dor'Athon stood with arms folded and expressions solemn. Thytr stood at the front of the Mohd'Athon, trying to mimic the Dor'Athon.

In the center of the Dor'Athon, Laramis raised both arms, and the Mohd'Athon quieted. He stepped forward and said, "The camp is settled and your training begun. We have done everything Kijin instructed us to do except one thing. Tonight we shall organize you in troops of

fifty and call leaders among you. Each of the ten Dor'Athon shall be responsible for one troop, and together with the Mohd'Athon captain we shall divide each troop into ten knots of five. Your knot will be your kin from this night forward. A shardsman knot can change the course of a war. If you doubt me, ask Kijin when he arrives four days hence."

A ripple of excitement passed through the group, but Thytr held fast, eyes on Laramis.

"Yes, we all look forward to his return." Laramis' eyes paused as they panned past Thytr. He continued, "When I call your name, step forward and stand on the stone in the order you name was spoken. Rizzart, Gellen, Derji, Hartlin, Draadri…" Thytr waited, expectantly. "Weldrig, Fewwn, Straugen, Nerti, and Thytr."

Laramis had promised Thytr he would be called, but he had not let himself believe it until he heard his name. As he stepped forward, he glanced at the other Mohd'Athon who came forward. He had seen nearly all of them train and respected the Dor'Athon's choices. They were the best. For a moment, he locked eyes with Hartlin and saw challenge in the other's gaze.

After the captains reached their places, each Dor'Athon walked to his position behind a stone. Thytr felt a strong hand on his shoulder. He looked and saw Laramis slip around to the front and speak. "These are your captains, Mohd'Athon. Know that our eyes have selected the best among you. The strongest, the most skilled, the most cunning. But now it is time to see which of the captains will take lead of this company."

Laramis turned to face the captains and said, "Any who wish to take charge of this company and report directly to me, and Kijin, step off of your stone and approach."

Thytr strode forward, not even looking at the other captains. He doubted any would challenge him except…Hartlin. The other captain matched his stride.

Laramis beamed, seeming pleased at the two who sought command. Thytr thought he saw Laramis flash disdain for the other captains who stood on their rocks. Thytr glanced at Hartlin, weighing him. Hartlin's broad shoulders framed the top of a strong, but not bulky form. He looked quite a bit like Laramis. Thytr was a good hand shorter and more on the thin side, but it was the skill with the blade and not the strength of the arm that would settle this contest. Laramis had told him what would happen if more than one captain stepped forward. He wondered if Laramis or another Dor'Athon had told Hartlin.

The Mohd'Athon cheered. Laramis turned and raised his arms again. Silence. "Hartlin and Thytr both seek the command and each may be worthy, but in the end, only one can lead."

The other Dor'Athon began gathering lantern poles as Laramis ushered the Mohd'Athon to the training grounds. Moments later, they were gathered around the center sparring ring.

Thytr tightened his leather armor as he walked in a crowd of Mohd'Athon. Jerly pushed through and wished him luck. Thytr doubted he would need it. He drew his blackshard and felt the grip reassuringly in his hand. Other Mohd'Athon moved away as he whistled the blade overhead to loosen muscles tight from training. Hartlin followed Thytr's lead and did the same on the opposite side of the circle.

Thytr continued his warm-up routine a little faster than normal. He caught himself stealing glances at Hartlin and scowled to himself for his lack of confidence. Still, Hartlin worked with a quickness that seemed forced. Several of his deeper lunges lacked crispness, hinted at overextension. Their eyes locked and Thytr decided Hartlin's harbored a sliver of uncertainty. Thytr continued his movements and wondered if his eyes said the same.

Laramis strode into the training ring with a lantern post in his right hand, and bade the Mohd'Athon to assemble and be still. Dor'Athon set lanterns every few feet around the ring,

leaving the inside as bright as midmorning. Laramis walked around the perimeter of the ring, pushing back those who crowded the edge and then took his place at the southern point. Thytr waited, feeling time slow. Finally, Laramis brought his hands together, and the combatants stepped into the circle to face each other.

It began.

Thytr tensed the muscles in his right arm to keep ready, and advanced with the blackshard angled low. Hartlin began circling to the right, shuffling his feet and stirring up sand. Thytr thought he was preparing for a peripheral attack and readied himself. But then, Hartlin planted his right foot and charged, blade spinning like pochy seed in the wind. He came much faster than Thytr expected. Blows rained down like hammer strokes. Hartlin was stronger than Thytr expected too. Significantly. Although he was quick, Thytr moved through his defenses quicker, and eluded the powerful strikes.

By angling his blackshard overhead, Thytr was able to deflect Hartlin's attack without absorbing the force of the blows. Keeping light on his feet, he dodged and positioned himself to defend the assault. *Keep coming*, he thought. Strength would work against Hartlin if he maintained the furious drive. Thytr moved through several defenses: Jealtig's Parry, Hopping Bearcat, and Weafry's Posture. His training manifested without thought as he withstood the assault. Hartlin's strikes became slower, weaker. With a grunt, Hartlin lunged forward to bear Thytr down with the weight of his body. Thytr's blackshard was out of position to counterstrike, but he was able to twist away and elude Hartlin's dive. Spinning and arcing his shard above his head, Thytr readied himself to deliver the final blow. He cried a death yell, and drove his blade down toward his foe's exposed back.

But Hartlin was not finished. He slid aside and kicked at Thytr's legs, catching him just below the knee. Had Thytr's foot been planted, the knee would have been ruined. Like a bobbing wren, Thytr hopped side-to-side and avoided Hartlin's flails. Before Hartlin could gain his feet, Thytr kicked his support arm, bending his elbow to the ground at an unnatural angle. Hartlin wailed and tucked the arm in. His shard was in the wrong hand as he lay prone.

"Enough!" roared Laramis. He jumped into the ring and congratulated Thytr. Thytr's heart beat so fast, and thoughts of running his shard through Hartlin's ribs so overcame him, that he heard nothing Laramis said.

The crowd roared.

* * *

The following day, Laramis woke Thytr early, and took him outside the valley and into the rocky hills for leadership training. Thytr would have enjoyed the opportunity to spar with the other Mohd'Athon in camp and feel their respect as he worked among them, but he relished the separation and recognition Laramis offered him.

"Your troop is raw, but shows promise, Thytr. You chose well in selecting your men."

"The camp is full of good soldiers, I would have done well had I chosen with eyes closed."

Laramis chuckled. "Take the compliment, Thytr. Although there are plenty of good men in the camp, and none who wear the title 'shardsman' are unworthy, some have more ability than others. And you kept the weaker men out of your troop." He walked forward with his back to Thytr, which kept Thytr silent until he turned and rested on a rust-colored boulder.

Thytr bit his cheek to stay quiet. His tongue had often brought him trouble while he was growing up, but he would learn to control it. When Laramis made eye contact, Thytr said, "After

sparring with a great number of them, the choices became clear." He wanted to remain humble in front of the undergeneral, but could not resist adding, "Of course, having earned the right of first choice by taking command of the Mohd'Athon, I did not have to rely on another making a mistake for me to get the men I wanted."

Laramis' chuckled some more. "Indeed, Thytr, you earned that right. You should be pleased with your station."

"I am. Some men are content to walk behind, but others want to walk in front. I think we're both the kind who prefer the view from the front of the line."

"It smells better up front, too. After you've trained in the Coable for a summer fortnight, you'll appreciate a nice headwind as you march."

For the greater part of the day, and as the sun bore down on them in their black armor, Laramis instructed Thytr in the details of military command, tactics, and protocol. Thytr had picked up quite a bit from his years of training in the compound near Hartogh Plateau, but he still had much to learn. By mid-afternoon, sweat beaded and rolled down his back where the armor gapped, but Laramis continued. In the end, Thytr respected Laramis even more for his thoroughness.

"Not a bad day of work, Thytr," Laramis complimented, retrieving a towel and skin of water from his pack. He took a long drink and tossed it to Thytr.

"Thanks." He tried to hide his disappointment at not being able to learn more with the blade.

"There will be more days like this over the upcoming weeks, but you'll get to use your shard as well." Laramis wiped the sweat from his brow with the towel.

Thytr smiled. He checked the horizon and estimated that a little less than a quarter-day's light remained. "Looks like the day isn't over. We could draw our blades and go through a session of reversals. I've heard you turn the Geltrip counterstrike faster than anyone."

Laramis laughed, "I'll be teaching counterstrikes to the other captains tomorrow night and you'll get your chance to test me then."

Thytr was glad the heat of the day and exertion had already left his cheeks red. "I didn't mean that I wanted to test you."

"Of course you did. If you didn't, you wouldn't be half the captain I expect you to be." He gave Thytr a knowing look, which Thytr returned. "If a man has pride in his abilities, he naturally wants to display his skill and prove himself."

"Is that true among the Dor'Athon?"

"Of course." Laramis' smile stopped short of his eyes. "That was why the Council established the Shardsman Code eleven centuries ago."

Thytr had not yet adjusted to the idea of living forever. Of course, with war on the horizon, many men's lives would be cut short. Not his. He would learn to enjoy longevity and use his years to advance into the hierarchies of the Shardsman Order.

"What do you mean?"

Most Dor'Athon paid little attention to the Mohd'Athon, let alone shared stories with them, and Thytr hoped to draw something out of Laramis.

"I'm sure you've heard the legends."

Thytr said nothing.

"Alright, I'll humor you with a short tale. Shortly before the end of the early wars, our fate started to become clear. Our raids cost more lives than they claimed, and our forces shrank like a wool undershirt in hot water. Dissention entered the order. Some who followed wearied

of their toil in defeat. Challenges to the leadership became more and more common. Soon, more shardsmen died on blackshards than on the tynthian steel of the Northlanders." Laramis paused to drink from his skin.

Thytr waited.

"The generals retreated to Grednal Fortress and sat in council for more than two fortnights. When they emerged, the Code had been established. No longer could one shardsman challenge another. Other standards were codified and delivered to the ranks. Ever since, we have lived by those rules."

Thytr had not heard anything new, but he enjoyed hearing Laramis tell the legend. For a moment he worried that he may have presented himself as a lack wit. "Of course, I've been taught the Code from the first day I entered training, but it is always an honor to hear the legend from one who lived it."

Laramis swallowed more water. "Indeed."

* * *

The next day passed much as the former, with long, hard instruction under the desert sun. The training in the evening, however, made up for the long hours. Thytr enjoyed matching skill with the other captains, proving he was better. He quickly mastered the movements Laramis performed. Instinct gave him a distinct advantage, and dedicated focus allowed him to bear the new lessons into habit with but a few practices. By the time the night was over, the other captains' faces dripped with blood and sweat. Cuts on cheeks, welts over ears, and swollen bruises all over their heads bore witness of their mistakes. Thytr only sweated.

He was ready to see Kijin.

Two nights later, the legend arrived. At dusk, a caravan of five shardsmen rode into camp on battle mounts, and five black-cloaked kymers followed in an open carriage drawn by four immense horses. Thytr had never seen such immense beasts. Yet, even more impressive was Kijin, who stood in the stirrups atop a sleek black and gray gelding appraising the camp with a smirk. The famous pock scars on his left cheek glistened under a sheen of sweat. Kijin rode through camp without uttering a word. Upon reaching the command tent where the other Dor'Athon waited, he walked past them and entered. He did not emerge again that night.

* * *

The next morning, Thytr worked his men hard in the burning sun. Taking Laramis' advice, Thytr taught them first to move as a unit, marching in formation. Second, he taught them to respect and hate him. If they thought of him as a friend, they might take him for granted, pay less heed to his orders. He cracked his knuckles on the head of a slow-moving soldier who outweighed him by a grain sack's weight. Thytr demanded precision. His soldiers quickly learned to deliver.

The camp and training grounds hushed when Kijin staggered from the tent, shielding his eyes from the burning sun. Thytr, having marched his company in formation for most of the morning, breathed heavy in the middle of the training grounds. Even from the distance, he could tell something was not right with Kijin. Laramis nearly sprinted after his general, and when he caught up, he supported him with an arm. Kijin vomited, then laughed while the sick dripped off his chin. Men in Thytr's company and others started moving toward the tent, but Laramis

shook his head. The captains and other Dor'Athon barked out orders for the men to return to the various tasks that had previously occupied them.

Thytr spat what little saliva his mouth would render upon the sand. His stomach felt like a butter churn. He wanted Kijin to be different than the other Dor'Athon. Like Laramis. He expected something different. His men would hate him, but he did not care. Until mid-afternoon, they marched at double speed south into the desert. They had no food, but Thytr would not have given them time to eat if they had. He needed to get away and think.

Perhaps Kijin was ill, Thytr mused. Perhaps he had not seen what he thought he saw. Thytr hoped he was mistaken, but doubted it. Drink and Hundant Weed had claimed his father's life. Thytr knew addiction when he saw it. Knew how a man could relinquish control of himself to a bottle or a powder.

"Captain! Drandar and Thues are falling behind," Feldman said, breathing hard.

Thytr was lost in thought and had to hear the message a second time before he ordered the company to march in place while the others caught up. After Thues reached them with a crimson face drenched in sweat, Thytr allowed the men a drink from their canteens and a short break. He could tell Thues hurt from the look on his face, but Thues did not complain. Thytr was pleased with his men.

That evening, Laramis came to Thytr while his company received a well-earned meal. "Kijin wants to meet the captains tonight."

Thytr took a moment to look up. "Yes, sir." He started to rise, but Laramis put a hand on his shoulder.

"Finish your meal and find a wet rag to scour your face. A change of tunic would also serve you well."

Thytr cringed. "Of course. Thank you, Dor' Laramis." He looked at the older's eyes, hoping to find an answer to the doubts he could not shake. What he found chilled him. Laramis' eyes held the same uncertainty.

Thytr grabbed two sweet apples as soon as Laramis left and snapped off large chunks as he jogged to his tent. Sticky juices dribbled down his chin. Once inside, Thytr peeled off his leather armor and undertunic, and wrinkled his nose at the stench. He longed for a swim or even a tub of water, but in the desert damp rags were the only weapon against the stink of body and cling of sand that training brought. Water from the well quenched the shardsmen's thirst, but could only go so far.

Wearing a moderately fresh uniform in place of his training gear, Thytr jogged to the command tent. A handful of the other captains had already gathered outside, so he did not announce himself to the Dor'Athon within. Hartlin stood a short distance away from the other captains. He stood slump-shouldered and dour-faced. Thytr thought of talking to him, but did not know what to say. Perhaps it would have been better on all of them if Dor' Laramis had let him kill the other captain. Few shardsmen placed life above honor.

"Heard you nearly killed half your company, Captain Thytr," Gellen said with an extended hand. His smile bore more admiration than sarcasm.

Thytr gripped hands with him. "I figured we were preparing for war — not a chamber ball."

Gellen and the other captains laughed. Thytr wondered if they thought he was funny or if they laughed because they viewed him as a superior. Gellen's smile seemed genuine.

"Somebody's got to dance with the maidens when we return." Gellen was handsome and would probably have his pick after the war.

After what seemed like a long wait the last of the captains, Straugen, arrived. He looked like he had taken a maiden's turn at the mirror fixing his long black hair. Thytr scowled a little and mussed it in spite of the man. The other captains laughed again. Thytr challenged Straugen with a stare, but Straugen quickly averted his eyes.

"Enter." Dor' Laramis welcomed them into the command tent and directed them to sit around a long table.

The smell of oiled canvas, incense, and burned oil covered an underlying odor of spice rum. The sun had not set outside, but the large tent was dark save the flickering glow from a few lanterns set on the table. None of the Dor'Athon except Laramis and Kijin were present, but two bald-headed kymers in long black robes stood behind Kijin at the head of the table. A steaming mug of dark brew sat before him.

The captains had lingered in the entryway of the tent. Laramis ushered them toward the table and indicated where each should sit as he announced them to Kijin. Thytr was pleased to claim his seat at Kijin's left hand, with Laramis at the general's right. Thytr thought Laramis looked weary, maybe nervous. Thytr wanted to take a long look in Kijin's eyes, but knew it would be offensive, or challenging to do so. Out of respect for Laramis, he sat silent with eyes forward.

Kijin leaned back in his chair. He whispered to one of the kymers, who retrieved two long scroll cases from a chest near the back wall of the tent. Kijin snatched the cases from the man's hands and twisted the end cap off one. He peered in and tossed it to the ground. He opened the second and pulled out a tattered yellow scroll. A map. Thytr and Laramis aided Kijin. Together, they laid out the map and placed lanterns on its corners to keep it from rolling back, and to shed light on the faint ink drawings. In detail, the borders, names, and geography of the Freeland Nations spread out before them.

Kijin drank slowly from the mug before rising to his feet. "More than a dozen centuries ago, my first company marched from the edge of the Coable to Saivers in less than three weeks." He indicated the path on the map. "We avoided contact in the woodlands of Calhoun, the grasslands of Polderia, and laid siege to the crossroad city for more than a fortnight. It fell. I thought we had cut out the heart of the Freelands by claiming its largest city. Other forces led by other generals did the same in Barrihem, Krentok, and Jeang Lin. We were fools."

Kijin paused while he drank to the bottom of the mug. His eyelids were thick and red, like he had sat too close to the downwind side of a green campfire or had not slept in a week. Yet, he continued with only a little slurring of speech.

"What we had done was drive the armies into the country where they gathered numbers and cut off our supply lines. We were as good as left on an island for them to pick away at like mice on a block of cheese. Before long, we were forced to retreat. When we came again, the cities were fortified. We never broke them with any lasting success. You all know the stories. That is why, this time, we will handle things differently."

Kijin raised the mug again only to discover it was empty. Spitting in disgust, he thrust the mug at the kymer who had retrieved the map. Moments later, he drank again.

"This time, we have the numbers. This time, we are going to claim land and defend it as we go. There will be only one front to defend at a time." The scars on his cheek twitched as he smiled. "Oh, there will be other objectives and some efforts are already underway. But those won't concern any of you." He smiled at Laramis. "This company will start the attack on the woodland realm of Calhoun. Your men will scour the forests and burn out the Delvin bowmen. You will claim our first toehold."

Thytr remembered one of the worst Southland defeats, one that changed the course of the

war, was a rout in the Calhoun. They would lose many men. Yet, the challenge exhilarated him.

Kijin indicated on the map several of the routes that led through the forest to Delvin. Then he dropped back into the seat. Swirling the liquid in the mug, he paused. Without looking up he said, "You are my captains. I trust that Dor' Laramis and the other officers chose well, and that you'll be competent leaders. What I have told you tonight you shall keep to yourselves until the orders to move out are given. You are dismissed." In a breach of etiquette, Kijin remained sitting as the captains left.

The setting sun seemed bright as midday when Thytr emerged. Inside, he was a mixture of excitement and disappointment. That he would be able to lead his troop into battle in the near future was more than he hoped for. He had expected to set up camp and wait for the forces to build in the valley before launching the invasion. He was ready to go, and believed that his men would be ready soon. Yet, Kijin was not who he expected.

"Hold up, Captain Thytr," Laramis said, jogging to catch up. "Let's have a word."

Laramis took Thytr to a rocky place on the western ridge. They sat with the last light of the sun on their backs, looking down on the camp. Hundreds of soldiers prepared for the night, moving about the tents like bees in a hive.

"What do you think?" Laramis asked.

Thytr knew what he meant, but did not know what to say. He paused. "I think I always pictured him as being bigger."

Laramis chuckled. "Most people do. The man could never live up to the size of his legend." He looked more serious. "I'll deny ever telling you this, but it eats at him." He breathed in through his nose and bit his lower lip. "He can meet the expectations people have for him. When he's sober. But those days don't come as often as I'd like."

Thytr did not know what to say. He was relieved that Laramis shared his concerns, but almost broken hearted that someone he always wanted to know, wanted to be like, could be so flawed.

Laramis continued. "I suppose I thought the war would clean him up. At times it has. But not enough. I cannot tell you specifics, of course, but the war plan is very complicated and requires diplomatic sensitivity and precise timing. I fear what will happen when the pieces of our plan start to fall in place and forces are put into motion."

Laramis rose and kicked a few clumps of sand into the air. "If we launch our attack too soon, the occupation forces will be too far behind, and the diplomatic elements will be compromised. Yet, he is anxious to get started. To finish the job that has hung over his head for too many years."

"But didn't he kill General Vanderhesche himself? Didn't he claim the greatest victory in the wars?"

Laramis shook his head. "Oh, he killed Vanderhesche. I saw it. But that was a strike of desperation when the Freeland victory had already been sealed. The war was lost. Finding joy in the assassination is like celebrating the one stalk of grain standing after a hailstorm has ruined the crop."

Thytr nodded his understanding.

Laramis clasped his hands behind his back and stared at the camp below. Thytr felt the silence loom awkwardly. Laramis finally turned and faced Thytr.

"Sometimes we must do the unthinkable for the good of the many." His words were measured in delivery and left no doubt as to their meaning.

Under the Code, Laramis was powerless to do anything but follow. He could not challenge

Kijin, and if anything untoward happened to the general and blame was discovered in Laramis, his head would hang on a pike. No, the law was clear. Only a Mohd'Athon could remove Kijin. And what Mohd'Athon would have a chance against the legend?

Thytr had very few doubts about his abilities, but he knew he was no match for Kijin. "Are you asking what I think you're asking?" Thytr thought his words sounded cheap and unsophisticated. Yet, he did not know how else to ask without putting himself on treasonous ground.

Laramis cocked his head. "I love him as a brother, but I cannot condone the risk he places us all under. We cannot fail because of one man's weaknesses." He nodded at Thytr. "If all things were equal, you would last no longer than a lamb against him. But if challenged, he would have to accept before the sun set or surrender to you. Normally, he awaits dusk to begin his indulgences, but if he feels secure, he may start early. I expect it may take more than a week before he would let his guard down in a new camp."

Thytr could not believe what they were considering. It scared and thrilled him. "And if I won?"

"He would be replaced. By law, the replacement would be the victor or the officer next in line. The decision would be made by the commanding officer in most cases. But, as Kijin has no commanding officer, the other officers in our unit would vote. In the present situation, I would almost certainly advance to general. I would then be free to name my undergeneral." He smiled at Thytr. A genuine smile. "I would owe you a great debt of gratitude. As would the rest of the Southlands. Trust me when I say you would be rewarded."

Visions of the possibilities raced through Thytr's mind, overwhelming him.

"I know this is not the sort of thing one enters lightly. As I said before, I'll deny every word if this gets out, so guard your tongue. The decision is yours. You should have at least a week to make it."

Thytr nodded. Down in the camp, lights flared and flashed in brilliant colors, dancing in the air like soldiers engaged in battle.

Laramis shook his head. "Kijin has the kymers putting on a show for the soldiers. You won't want to miss it."

They walked down the slope side by side. After a particularly impressive shower of sparks, Thytr whistled in admiration of the show. "I've never seen kymers use their talents in such a way."

"Truly, it is a waste of talent. I just hope the sparks don't rise high enough for Calhoun watchmen to notice."

Thytr felt embarrassed that he had not considered the risk.

Laramis slowed him down as they neared the outer ring of tents. "Starting tomorrow, end your training with your company by dinner and plan on spending an hour or two with me in the evening. I think I may be able to show you a few attacks that would serve your style well."

Thytr's heart beat fast. He struggled not to smile too stupidly as he accepted the offer.

* * *

Over the following days, Thytr's training went well. He thoroughly enjoyed sparring with Laramis, who was the first person he had faced who matched his ability with the blackshard. More than matched. Thytr thought he had impressed Laramis with how quickly he grasped the lessons. Not once, however, did they revisit the discussion about Kijin. His problems were

kept mostly within the command tent. Yet, on occasion, his bellowing laugh could be heard by shardsmen training nearby.

On the fourth evening after their conversation on the rim, Thytr had felt the flat of Laramis' practice blade twice on his right cheek before blocking the complicated attack as he had been instructed. The wooden blades knocked together, and he turned to his left to position for a counterstrike.

"Good. That time you kept your elbow high enough to defend with the shard."

"Would I be better served to counterstrike with a full stroke, or a Crandle Drop?"

"A modified Crandle Drop, actually," Laramis said, switching his blade to his left hand and showing Thytr the ideal angle to strike. "You won't be able attack your opponent's vitals, but you'll get a clean slice at his right leg. Practice carefully and if your pivot comes quick enough, you can cut the tendons in his knee. That's almost as good as a death strike."

Four more times, Laramis pressed the attack faster and faster, but Thytr was ready each time. The pivot flowed naturally and the counterstrike became more efficient with each practice. On the last counterstrike, Thytr even glanced a blow off Laramis' knee with the practice blade.

"Excellent." Laramis smiled as he kicked in the air, flexing his knee. Seemingly satisfied with its movement, he tossed the wooden blade to the ground and walked over to his water skin.

Thytr was happy for the break. He normally endured hard training better than the other soldiers, but Laramis always pushed him farther than his comfort zone. He gulped a couple swallows of cool water and dropped the skin to the ground. Not too much or his side would ache. Besides, Laramis might push him for another hour before finishing the session.

"You won't mind if we go a little long tonight, will you?" Laramis asked.

Thytr shook his head. "If your leg doesn't hurt too badly, we can go all night." He worried that he might be getting too comfortable with his senior officer. A week ago he would not have even considered teasing a Dor'Athon.

Laramis chuckled. "I'll make sure you have a lump on your forehead to match the bruises on your cheek. Maybe tomorrow night your shard will be as quick your tongue." He winked, and Thytr did not know if he was serious.

Laramis continued. "Things have changed, Thytr." He drank while Thytr wondered what he meant. "Our time is nearly spent. Kijin's kymers have been reading the moon cycles, and we will have black skies for the next week and a half. Storms approach, and we will either be caught in the weather, which we have planned for, or we can take advantage of the opportunity by moving on the woodland realm. Kijin wearies of waiting. He has asked us to gather the captains at midday and give the orders to prepare to break camp the following morning."

Thytr studied Laramis as he spoke and saw the doubt in his eyes. "You think it folly?"

"I would never publicly second-guess my general. But, your men need more training and our siege needs more numbers. We were supposed to be the vanguard, not the entire assault."

"So we are going to go through with 'our' plan, then?"

"That is up to you. I'll give you a little more training tonight if you are still inclined to carry it out." Laramis' gaze left Thytr feeling like a piece of butcher's meat that had been weighed and measured.

"I am willing to do what is best for my men and our people. But, I don't know what chance I will stand." Training with Laramis had proved to Thytr that others were better than he.

"You'll need an advantage, but I think you will get it. Kijin has always been one to celebrate on the eve of a march. I expect that much of the afternoon we will feast and drink. Judging by his current inclinations, Kijin could be induced to drink more than he ought. If you

waited 'til near dusk to challenge him, you'd have the only clear head in the battle."

"My victory would be tainted." Thytr kicked a clump of sand into the air. He did not like the thought of challenging a vulnerable man.

"This isn't about honor or chivalry. It's about stopping a horrible mistake before it happens." Laramis dropped his water skin and stared at Thytr. "Will you do it?"

Thytr chewed the inside of his cheek. He could die. He could be a hero. Or, maybe, he could be the greatest villain in the Southlands. He could live with that.

"Yes."

Laramis' mouth made a barely perceivable smile.

More than three hours later, two men walked down the slope to a dark camp. The younger of the two wore a lump on his forehead the size of a swallow's egg, and both dripped with sweat.

* * *

The hollow whistle of a stringed reed being swung drew the Mohd'Athons' attention near midday. The captains had been advised to train within the valley all day. Thytr believed he was the impetus for that instruction, as he had gained a reputation for hard morning marches. His men would thank him later when they survived a battle because their legs did not falter when ambushed at the end of a long march. In war, fatigue killed as many men as weakness, ineptitude, and stupidity. His men would die from none of those. It was a hot day, and the smell of sweat would have driven any refined woman from the valley. But the shardsmen would face much worse in the days to come. They packed in near the familiar training grounds where Thtyr had been named captain only a few nights earlier. He remembered the fight with Hartlin. The thrill of victory. The cheers of the shardsmen. The fear and admiration in their eyes in the days that followed. What could he expect if he won that night? He forced doubt away like an unwelcome beggar. *When* he won that night?

Laramis and the other Dor'Athon patrolled the front of the crowd, where captains stood ready. Laramis held up his hands, and soon the valley was silent. Kymers, wearing long black robes that shimmered in the sunlight, glided across the sand to the front of the gathering like a pack of wraiths. Thytr thought they looked unnatural in the daylight, like they belonged to the night. From within their midst, Kijin emerged. He looked every bit as impressive as he had the day he rode into camp. His armor gleamed in the sunlight. His hair was combed and his eyes were sharp and cunning like a wolf's. As he prepared to speak, the corners of his mouth turned down into a sneer.

Kijin's voice boomed over the gathering, "You are not one quarter as many as the army I led north those long centuries ago. Maybe not one tenth. You are not as prepared as were those shardsmen. Death will come to you as quickly as it came to them. But victory will come even more quickly."

The shardsmen, who were growing nervous, cheered at the last line.

Kijin waved them into silence. "You will be the first to draw blackshards. And, by the will of the creators, you will be the last to clean the blood from your blades when the war is over." More cheers. Kijin paced in front of the soldiers, staring at individual men as he went. Thytr met eyes with him twice. Each time, Thytr felt an icy pain in the depths of his stomach and cursed himself for his weakness.

"The Dor'Athon will instruct your captains regarding specific assignments, but I will tell you that the entire camp will be engaged in claiming the Calhoun Forest as our toehold on

the Freelands. Once we control the woodland realm, our armies will be able to amass on the border without being seen. The forest, its villages, and even the great city of Delvin will offer up bounteous supplies. The days ahead will be the most critical you will face, and shall forge in you the metal of your character."

The Mohd'Athon cheered where appropriate, but Thytr could feel an uneasiness around him when Kijin told them where they would be going. Too many shardsmen lost their lives in those woods. Nonetheless, by the time Kijin was finished, the Mohd'Athon were frenzied with excitement.

They would break camp in the morning. The rest of the day was given to celebration… except for the captains, who were to meet with their Dor'Athon and learn what was expected of them and their companies.

Laramis took Thytr aside, and they walked through camp toward the captains' tents. Instead of stopping, they continued through until they were free of the other shardsmen and climbed the familiar slope. They did not speak until they were well away from everyone.

Thytr gritted his teeth to stave off anxiety. "Kijin looks clear-minded today, Dor' Laramis."

"Yes. But that will change soon enough." He nodded back down the hill and a moment later, Thytr located Kijin in a crowd with a mug in hand. Laramis said, "I'll be expected to train you for a couple hours, so we have plenty of time to talk about what will happen."

"I'd rather train."

Laramis chuckled. "I would too, but you'll need your wit and reflexes to be fresh tonight. As late as we trained last night, you could use rest more than last minute instruction."

Thytr was afraid he would say something like that. "Well, perhaps you could tell me about Kijin and how I might try to face him."

Laramis slung his pack to the ground and stretched his back. "He's flawless. I've never seen anyone, save Vanderhesche, match his skill." Thytr felt the blood drain from his face. "He won't be flawless tonight, Thytr. But he'll be all you want to handle. If he can stand, he'll be good enough to take most every shardsman in the camp. Including some of the Dor'Athon."

Thytr did not know if Laramis was testing his resolve, trying to scare him, or complimenting him. He pushed doubt from his mind, trusting his abilities. "I'll wait until you tell me the time is right."

"It will have to be subtle."

"I'll pay attention."

Laramis nodded and put a hand on Thytr's shoulder. "I'm sure you will." He arose and gave Thytr a look that closed the discussion. "Why don't we slip behind the hill and you can claim a little rest."

Thytr would not admit how good the idea sounded, but gladly followed Laramis.

* * *

Thytr found little rest that afternoon. He stretched on his side to block out the glare of the sun. He just could not find a comfortable position on the sand with Laramis nearby. Although he knew he needed rest, his stomach kept churning and, before long, he rolled to his back and sighed in frustration.

"Why do the Dor'Athon let the Mohd'Athon challenge them when they have forbidden it among themselves?" The question had tickled Thytr's mind at odd times the previous week.

Laramis walked over and sat with his back to the sun. "That's a good question, Thytr.

The easy answer is that Mohd'Athon did not exist when the Code was written, so the original laws did not apply to them. But, when we gained the favor of the creators and were given the blessings of immortality again, the fear of extinction dwindled."

"If that's so, why not just let the Mohd'Athon challenge each other, then?" Thytr glanced over at Laramis, surprised that the older shardsman was answering his questions.

"Have you ever seen lions eat after a kill, Thytr?"

"No. But I've hunted them in the Rahdred Plains."

"When a pride brings down a large animal, the biggest and strongest lions walk over to the kill and eat their fill first. Then the other lions take their turn. It's the order of life among the pride."

"I understand."

"What keeps the pride strong is that if a Lion becomes weak, sick, or just plain old, then younger, stronger lions challenge for control of the pride. That way, the fate of the pride is left to the most powerful. The unfit lion is replaced for the good of the many."

"I guess I'm not sure I understand. The shardsmen live forever. We don't get old or weak." Thytr sat up.

"We don't grow old, or weak of body, but even the most powerful shardsman can become unfit if he loses focus, or lets his mind wither. I think you've seen that." Laramis shook his head.

"That just goes to show that the Code should be changed, the strongest Dor'Athon should be allowed to challenge for control."

"Our decision was made long ago. We chose to preserve the remnant of shardsmen. Prophecy foretold of the day our numbers would swell if we abided the Code, and our obedience has been rewarded."

"So, we are the young lions?" A chill of excitement rippled down Thytr's spine.

"Yes. You are a lion, but only if you get a chance to be a lion, a chance to take control of the pride."

"What do you mean?"

Laramis sifted sand through his fingers as he spoke. "Without the promise of leading the pride, you Mohd'Athon would be something other than lions – it's in our nature to want to lead. Without the hope of leading the order of shardsmen, you'd be hyenas. The older lions could swat you away from the prey and rule the plains for a time, but in the end your numbers, strength, and tenacity would overwhelm us."

Thytr nodded, understanding.

Laramis smiled. "I'd rather have you in the pride." He rose and brushed the sand off his water skin. "It's time to rejoin camp. Just don't get too caught up in the celebration."

"No worries there."

They walked down to camp together.

* * *

Thytr drank a glass of spiced wine and ate a plate of food in the mid afternoon, but neither helped calm his stomach. His normal confidence kept being invaded by thoughts that he was making a mistake and that he risked too much.

A slap on his back startled him. It was Jerly. "Ready for the challenge?"

"What?" Thytr immediately feared that word of his plan had gotten out. That was impossible.

"You ready to lead our company into battle?" Jerly's smile twitched a little and he fumbled his fingers together.

Thytr had chosen Jerly to be in his company near the end of selecting several nights earlier. It was an act partly motivated by pity, because Jerly would not amount to much of a soldier, and partly because he knew he could trust him. It was always good to keep men you trusted nearby. "Oh, yes. We'll cut through the forest like a shard through a melon."

Jerly laughed and scooted away. Thytr spent much of the rest of the afternoon in his tent. That would draw attention and curiosity, but before it grew to rumor or gossip, the camp would know what he was up to. Late in the afternoon he came out feeling a little more rested. After a painfully long period of revelry by his company, and back slapping and hand shaking, Thytr found Laramis with two of the other Dor'Athon.

Thytr did not want to interrupt, but when Laramis saw him approach the older broke away from the others, saying, "My young captain must need help buckling his boots." Thytr even shared in their laugh at his expense.

Laramis led him to the food table and plated up a handful of pickled beets. "Get some." He nodded at his plate.

"I think I'll pass." Thytr's stomach gurgled.

"They're delicious and good for you. I think you should try some." A flashing glare told Thytr that Laramis was not making an idle suggestion.

Thytr wolfed down his plateful of beets and was surprised that they took a bit of the edge off his nerves. His stomach still churned, but much slower.

Thytr saw the sun nearing the horizon. He looked at Laramis.

Laramis gave a partial nod.

Thytr had seen Kijin a half dozen or more times that afternoon, and each time his eyes had been more red and his hand had always held a tankard. But as Thytr searched for the general, he had trouble locating him. Panic quickened his pace, and he feared he would miss his opportunity. What would he do then?

He pushed through camp and came back another way. Still no sign of the general. Then the familiar bravado-saturated voice, slurred by drink, called out from the other side of a tent. "And then he climbed to the top of a rock in nothing but his small clothes. His knees knocked like a five year old girl's."

Thytr smiled. He rounded the corner and found Kijin with his arm around Captain Weldrig, who was leaning away from Kijin with each word. Thytr saw spittle dripping from Kijin's mouth and smelled spiced wine as he approached. Two of the black-cloaked kymers saw Thytr and stepped up to greet him.

"Well met," Thytr said. "I must have a word with Dor' Kijin." Thytr felt a popping in the air and worried that they might use their talents to stop him. A cold fear flashed as thought—perhaps they could see into his mind.

At the mention of his name, Kijin looked up. "Ah, Captain Thytr, come hear the ssstory of General Vanderhesche's demissse." The words were cheery, but thickly slurred.

Several days earlier, Thytr would have marched a week barefoot in the sand to hear Kijin relate the famous tale himself. He shook his head. With the kymers eyeing him so closely, he could not wait. "I'm sorry, Dor' Kijin, but I have come to ask for your shard." It was an ancient form of challenge. Thytr offered it as a token of honor to the legend. Weldrig's mouth fell agape.

Kijin looked up and cocked his head while focusing on Thytr. He looked at the sun nearly setting. "Planned this out, did you?" Thytr smelled the foul odor of food and drink with each word

Kijin spoke. “Thought you’d find an advantage in me thisss night, eh. Thought you’d like a piece of my legend.” The kymers moved quickly to his sides and helped move him away from Thytr. “Get ready, boy! I’ll ssskin you like a sssquirrel!”

Weldrig walked away with a lack wit’s gape for an expression. Soon, the buzz spread like a prairie fire in a windstorm. Thytr could hardly move as shardmen pressed around him. Most accused him of being mad. A few wished him luck. Some called him vile names, but never when they were next to him. Before long, he had pressed his way to the training arena. The place where he had defeated Hartlin.

Thytr drew his shard and watched his hand twitch. Laramis had taught him a focusing exercise that involved slow, steady breathing and picturing a succession of fighting stances in his mind. It helped. He warned the shardsmen around him to give him space and they did. His shard cut through the air with powerful arcs, dancing at his will, almost as quick as thought. When he could feel sweat dampen his undertunic, he stopped and spent a few moments adjusting his armor. Every time he let his mind wander, it meandered to Kijin. If he did not force his mind to move away, a lump bulged in his throat. He forced himself to concentrate on his mundane preparations. He could not afford to have a boot loosen.

Finally, a group of Dor’Athon pushed through the crowd like a cow through a wheat field, slow and deliberate. When they neared the arena, they pushed the Mohd’Athon back. From the middle of the group, with Laramis at his side, strode Kijin. Well-worn black leather armor gleamed in the failing light. Nicks and repaired panels bore witness of the battles Kijin had seen. A half length Karbuchi Spear with a jagged tip poked over his shoulder, and a blackshard hung at his side. The only part of Kijin that offered Thytr any hope was his eyes. They were red and glossy and devoid of amusement.

Kijin walked close and in a voice only loud enough for Thytr to hear said, “I hope you like the desert, boy, ‘cause we won’t tote your body back to civilization. You’ll spend the rest of eternity under the sun, under the sand. At least there aren’t any worms in the desert. Just scorpions, snakes, and jackels. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure your men bury you deep enough to be safe from scavengers.” Kijin drew his blade and quickly worked through a stretching routine. The shard blurred in the air, but his fluidity was choked with lumps of inebriation.

Thytr could see the natural ability behind the movements. He was glad for the advantage he had, and was certain his legend would not start on a tainted foundation.

Yet, he knew he was alone.

Laramis circled the perimeter and told several Mohd’Athon to back up. He walked past Thytr without saying a word, or even acknowledging him with a glance.

Thtyr could hear Kijin’s name being chanted by the crowd. Kijin continued to swing his blackshard in circles over his head.

“Begin!” said Laramis.

Thytr planted his feet, readying himself for a hard charge, like Hartlin had made. Kijin stood across the ring with his back to Thytr and arms raised high in the air.

“I have heard from the Dor’Athon that this Mohd’Athon is the best among you.” Kijin turned slowly, addressing the whole gathering. “He has sparred with most of you and left you bleeding and beaten.” When Kijin finally faced Thytr, Thytr was shocked to see the redness of eyes and bleary expression almost completely washed away. Kijin continued, “Tonight, he shall feel the blade and taste his own blood.” The shardsmen cheered.

Thytr glanced at Laramis, across the circle. He refused to believe that Kijin could have sobered so completely, so soon. Thytr would press the advantage he had. Measuring his steps,

he attacked. Blackshard held chest high, he worked through several stances that allowed him to thrust at Kijin from defensible positions. It was like trying to poke a mosquito with a stick. Kijin was not a large man, about Thytr's size, but he was incredibly fast and agile. The crowd roared with each of Thytr's failed strikes.

Kijin slipped Thytr's blade to the side and pinned the Mohd'Athon's arm. "Laramis promised you'd make a match of it, boy. Don't disappoint your soldiers." He flung Thytr to the ground and raised his shard. Thytr raised his blade to block and swept at Kijin's legs. Kijin sprung away like a jumping beetle, keeping his feet, but allowing Thytr the chance to spin up.

A few shardsmen chanted Thytr's name. Thytr thought he could hear Jerly's deep voice, but it was all a bit of a blur. Kijin attacked. Thytr worked through a series of defensive maneuvers, and saw the opening he needed. Kijin's attacks came for the right side, leaving him open for the counterstrike he had practiced with Laramis. He readied himself, absorbed Kijin's strike, and pivoted as hard and fast as he could. The modified Crandle Drop. He knew the angle he should downstrike before he finished his pivot, and swung his shard at Kijin's knee. But Kijin was ready. He lunged into Thytr's body and drove him to the sand. Kijin kept Thytr's arms pinned and leaned in close. "Now that was an impressive move. I'm glad Laramis told me to expect it. I wouldn't want to find my blood on your shard."

Thytr's heart pounded in his chest. "No!" was all he could muster. He yelled in part out of frustration for missing his opportunity, but more to chase away the thought of Laramis' betrayal.

Kijin's knee crushed between Thytr's legs, nearly blacking him out. Kijin rose and held both arms high, while Thytr vomited on the ground. The pain made him curl into a ball, but he forced himself to roll away and rise to his feet. He was taught when wounded to focus on his opponent to keep his mind off the pain. It helped.

Kijin spoke to the crowd. "The Dor'Athon told me that you have begged them for instruction and that you were eager for me to arrive. From this night forward, until we reach the Calhoun, I will instruct you. This shall be your first lesson." He turned to Thytr.

Thytr forced the pain from his mind and charged. Careful not to overextend on any of his strokes, he mounted a vicious attack. But Kijin moved as though he knew exactly where Thytr's blade would be three moves in advance. Thytr could not hit him and could not force him into an indefensible position. Twice, Thytr saw that he left himself open for a counter, but none came. He came to an icy realization as he labored to maintain the attack. Kijin was playing with him. Thytr could see the calm, yet focused expression on the general's face. Thytr would not hit him, could not.

Thytr stepped back and glanced around, seeing the faces of a mass of shardsmen. Cheering faces. Bodies pressed tightly around the circle, leaving no gaps, no escape. He smelled blood and fear — both his own. He could yield, but he would lose all honor, and his life would be in Kijn's hands. Kijin would very likely kill him anyway. His straying thoughts left him vulnerable. Kijin flicked his blackshard at Thytr's face, cutting a gash into his forehead. Thytr turned away and retreated a few steps. He mopped at the blood and sweat with the sleeve of his armor. It stung his eyes and blurred his vision.

The crowd grew quiet, and Thytr could feel Kijin near him. His eyes were useless.

"Thytr is a fine example to you." Kijin yelled. "If you learn his dedication to the shard, our army will sweep through the Freeland Nations." Thytr saw a blurry boot kick him in the chest. He fell back. "If you learn his aggression and desire to be the best, you'll go far in the ranks of leadership." Kijin kicked him in the side. "If you learn to keep your mind as sharp as his, you'll outthink your opponents at most every turn." Thytr felt the sharp point of the blade slice into his

side.

"But, most importantly, if you want to survive to the end of time and deserve the rank of shardsman, you must learn what he did not. Arrogant, unchecked ambition will earn you death."

Thytr tried to scramble away, but his legs would not support him. He tumbled back to the ground and felt Kijin's shard again.

"It is better that one shardsman should die, even if he is the strongest captain among you, to fix this lesson into your minds. As we prepare to go into war, there is one general over you. If you follow orders and respect my authority, we will drink Polderian white wine in the Brasin Hills as the leaders of the Freeland Nations swear fealty to our king. Thytr's death is thus suffered for the good of the many."

Kijin leaned close and whispered, "Go with honor, young shardsman." Thytr swung his shard wildly, but hit only air. Then, a piercing pain ripped through his body, right where his stomach met his chest. He fell backward and felt the blade leave his body. A thud sounded in his ears, but he did not even feel himself hit the ground.

It was over. The coppery taste of blood filled his mouth, and he coughed. He heard Laramis' voice call out to the crowd, "Do not forget this night, Mohd'Athon. You are shardsmen by name and right, but you must never forget your roles. Let Thytr's pride and the death it brought him serve as an example to you all. Be satisfied with the measure of honor you shall win in the war we begin on the morrow. Be satisfied with the command we impart upon you."

Tears filled Thytr eyes as he heard Laramis speak. He wanted to think that he had been close to having it all. He commanded the Mohd'Athon and almost made rank as undergeneral. No, he was no closer to being second in command of the Southland Army than any blind stable boy from Krentok. It was a lie, a betrayal. What did it matter anyway? Images blurred before him. Faces flicked into his mind. His mother, his father, Lorissa Coornige, who he had left crying to become a shardsman. Honor over life, he remember saying. Honor over love. He chuckled and blood dribbled down his chin. He gave away everything for a chance at honor and glory. Now all that he worked to gain dripped into the sand beneath him. It was hot, getting hotter. All he wanted was a drink of cool water. There was some honor in death. He clung to the hollow satisfaction that he died on the most famous shard in the Southlands. It was not satisfying, but it was something.

Then, everything went black.

# The End

*Brendon Taylor is an attorney in Southeast Idaho and one of the founders of The Amberlin Group and Deep Magic. Thytr is set in the world where his upcoming novel,* The Stone of Despair*, is set. On writing fantasy, Brendon believes, "The beauty of the fantasy world and its characters lie in the mind of the author. It is his job to share that vision with the reader." He enjoys being a part of Deep Magic and allowing dreams and visions to be shared by fans of the genre.*

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"Lucky you. Mayhap they will make you a nurse, as I am," said Gwyneth. Then, considering, "Actually, you'll probably become a stable girl."

Ry-anne raised her head—eyes immediately landing on Markooth, whose kind wink made her smile. "You're drunk, Gwyn."

"Do you think? And you…" Gwyneth pointed an unsteady finger at her. "You should not even be taking the ale at all. I have to say I'm rather surprised at you Markooth, for even letting this one taste the liquor. Tut tut."

"Oh for Grand's sake, Gwyn. He's not my Pappy—I can do what I like."

Markooth looked thoughtful. "You know, maybe you shouldn't…"

"Just try and stop me," Ry-anne said, voice croaky from the burning drink.

"Just be wise with it."

Ry-anne fixed him with a stare.

"Oh Gwynnie, we'd better tread careful—I think I smell an argument in brewing here," teased Davvy. Ry-anne punched his shoulder. "Ow! Yes, I think it is safe to say that things are getting rather rowdy." He rubbed his sore spot.

Gwyneth pushed a carpet of luxurious long hair back over her shoulders and leaned against Davvy. "Then maybe we should move ourselves out the way."

Davvy raised his eyebrows. He was not the only one. Markooth's look was questioning, but Ry-anne just shrugged. Gwyneth would certainly have said if she was sleeping with Davvy. She told her everything else, whether Ry-anne liked it or not. Gwyneth whispered in Davvy's ear and he put his head in his hands, laughing.

"Gwyn! Now you know we can't do that unless we're partnered."

"Let's partner then."

"Oh sure, why ever not? Come on Gwyneth, I think I'd better escort you back to your Wing."

"No! Dammit Davvy I am most serious!" She tried to sit up straight. "Ry-anne, come now and perform the ceremony for us. You're the only one that's all holy and innocent here. Right, Markooth? Come on, speak it: 'Gwyneth, look upon the face of Davvy, your future…' Damn-the-Grand, what's the rest?"

"Well let me know when you have it figured, dear sister. Meanwhile, I'm going for a swim," Ry-anne said and set down her mug. She pushed herself upright and brushed soil off her robe.

"You're seriously thinking of taking a swim in the lake?" Markooth asked. Gwyneth had positioned herself on Davvy's knee, who was mildly protesting this forwardness.

Ry-anne put her hands on her hips. "What's the matter, too cold for you?"

"Yes! It'll be freezing!"

"So. You coming or what? Or are you as yellow as I always thought you were, O privileged high-born? Ist thou not allowed to get one's precious feet wet?"

"Right!" Markooth pounced.

Ry-anne squealed and ran round the other side of the lake, ferns whispering as she dived through them. Markooth chased her into the shadowy embrace of a group of cider trees. They smelled of ale and made the air feel clammy. Ry-anne hid behind one, holding her breath and trying to sense where Markooth was. The slippery tree bark soaked into her robe and stained it like oil. Mammy Gamine would pop a clog when she saw it.

Undergrowth cracked as Markooth's sandals crushed it. Close. "Aha!" A hand grabbed her wrist and Ry-anne yelped. She darted away from him and Markooth lost his grip on her. She emerged by the lake and stopped hastily, sensing that the ground in front was unsteady. But

Markooth came rushing up behind, bumping her forward. She screamed, piercing the blanket of night quiet and hunted furiously for Markooth. For anything to cling to. She snatched a handful of his robe but the earth beneath was crumbling. It was inevitable. She crashed backwards into the water and Markooth came tumbling after, headfirst. Water went up her nose and Markooth's body shoved her down deeper into the water. She was deaf awhile until she struggled up to the surface, coughing and spluttering, with Markooth's help.

She shivered loudly, teeth chattering. The cold shock had been nastier than she'd expected.

"You alright?" He looked amused, hair plastered to his forehead.

Ry-anne shook off his grasp, the movement forcing her deeper out. Still, she managed to give his head a good whack. Water droplets flew upwards. "You dumb horse! That was your fault!"

Markooth pushed the water out of his eyes and raked back his hair so it stuck up all pointy. "My fault? You were the one who got me chasing you in the first place!"

Ry-anne tilted onto her stomach and paddled towards the side, robe getting tangled in her legs. She landed next to Markooth and clutched the earth as he did. "Perhaps that is so. But I did not ask you to push me in, did I?"

There was laughter. "I see you got your swim after all." Gwyneth called.

"Oh yes, why I'm just fine!" Ry-anne shouted back. "Thanks kindly for your concern."

Nobody answered, but Ry-anne heard giggling and then the smooching sounds of more kissing. She shook her head. Markooth was smiling indulgently. "And what do you want?"

"It was an accident, Ry."

"Course it was." Still half deaf in one ear, she tipped her head to one side and tried to shake the water loose. It trickled out all warm. Ry-anne massaged that ear and then smoothed back her soaking hair.

"If you don't stop sulking like a babby then I'll dunk you again."

"Like damn you will!"

"Oh, won't I? Go on, I'll give you a head start." His golden eyes still glinted bright even in the dark.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Three…two…"

Ry-anne launched off on her back, then spun quickly around and front-crawled towards the opposite side of the lake. Markooth caught up easily but she never gave in without a fight. She kicked him off—way below where she should have—and heard him double up and groan. Eventually he cheated and a strong force twisted her onto her back and yanked her through the oil-black water. Waves roared up either side and she choked on water. Markooth's arms grasped her about her waist. His mentals held them both afloat.

"Got you."

"Got me choking!"

"Getting soft now are we? Sweet Grand, I pray you're not going to go all girly like Gwyneth."

For some reason that made her feel good. When normally she would have struggled out of his arms and punched him thoroughly, she stayed right where she was. Her heart raced as fast as the crickets were shrilling when she realized that Markooth did not move away either. They had never been this close before, with his whole body pressed against hers. Oh they'd had plenty of play fights before and plenty of real ones, too. But that was 'contact without intent' as Immediates and Judiciary would phrase it. This wasn't. This was where they could

get in trouble. She could feel his breath, quickened by the breathtaking cold water, as it puffed repetitively against her neck. Water dripped from the end of his nose and plinked onto an exposed shoulder, where her robe had slightly slipped off.

"Filthy cheat," she whispered.

He leaned in to speak. "Me a cheat? I seem to remember a certain somebody kicking me in a particularly sensitive area."

It was amazing that she could blush in the freezing cold. Thank the Grand Markooth couldn't see. She shrugged, a slower action than usual in the water. "It was an accident."

He laughed and she felt his body shake. Ry-anne stayed frozen. Silence dragged and there seemed nothing more to say. No more reason to stay like this. "You must be freezing," Markooth said at last. "You'd better go to warm yourself by the fire or you'll catch a chill."

They dragged themselves out of the water that no longer seemed as cold as it had when they *accidentally* fell in. But it was a different matter when they were out of the water. Ry-anne shuddered and rushed to the fire. Markooth followed.

Gwyneth raised her head from a kiss and looked at Ry-anne, who was trying to squeeze the water from her robe. "I do hope you Pair were not breaking the rules of the House down there."

Markooth knelt down and they glanced at each other quickly. He frowned. "Don't be ridiculous. Ry-anne is nothing more than a child. I would never even consider it."

Gwyneth smiled and lay on Davvy's chest, who was falling asleep. His freckled cheeks were crimson from the ale and the fire. And Gwyneth too, most likely.

Markooth purposely avoided Ry-anne's gaze. So she sulked and continued to dry her robe. Long after Markooth had fallen to sleep, when her brooding thoughts eventually allowed slumber, Ry-anne was still sore.

* * *

She screamed till her throat was raw and swam violently out of the dream before she drowned. Markooth shook her—she batted him away.

"Ry-anne! Ry-anne wake up!"

At last, she came out of the suffocating darkness into the blessed light of the dawn.

"Holy Grand, Ry. We don't need the bells to wake us with you around, do we?"

Gwyneth's voice.

"Better now? You gave us quite a fright you know. Markooth has been trying to wake you for an age," said Davvy.

"Sorry. Bad…bad dream."

Davvy grinned and went away with Gwyneth, who was tugging at his arm and wanting him to carry the ale jug. Only Markooth remained. He crouched close. "Same one?"

Ry-anne sighed and rubbed her eyes. Her whole body ached from sleeping on uneven ground and her nose felt stuffy. She prayed she hadn't caught a chill, though it was likely.

"Mm," she said. "Same sort of thing anyway." Her voice cracked and she reached instinctively for the ale mug. "Ugh!" Its stale taste was even worse than last eve.

"Do you want to talk it over?"

She shook her head and rose to a sitting position with difficulty. Her robe was a mess, all crumpled and creased and stained a slight off-yellow from the lake water. "No." She looked at him sharply. "And don't go looking either."

"I won't!" He seemed offended.

"I'll know if you do."

"For the sake of Glandor, I won't. Not if you don't want me to."

Ry-anne nodded and picked up her mug. She threw its contents on the grass with a splash and got up to scoop some water from the lake. "Don't you have to hurry? It's your first morn now is it not?" She took a long, cool drink. She chucked away the rest of the water and tentatively splashed her face, washing away the dregs of the dream and bringing her fully into reality. She dried her face roughly with the hem of her robe.

"Aye. But I ought to get cleaned up first. Will I see you this eve?"

Ry-anne got up from the bank of the lake and turned to face him, at the same time raking fingers through the knots in her wild waves. "Certainly. I've a spell test to revise for, but I'll be along after."

"No. I'll meet you outside your wing with Grey and we'll go riding. We could ride out to Pantherea town and see some of the festival or—"

Ry-anne shook her head, familiar irritation errupting. "I'm coming up to your house, Markooth—I'm not afraid of him, even if you are."

Markooth looked stung and Ry-anne instantly regretted her outburst. But she wouldn't take it back. They both knew that. "Fine. If that's what you want." He strode off angrily.

"Yellow idiot," she muttered to herself as he waved bye to Gwyneth and Davvy, who were busy collecting up the mugs. Yet it was Kelthro she was really angry at. And it was about time somebody taught him a lesson.

* * *

Markooth checked that his robe was tied tight enough, his cutter in his thigh boot, his hefty gold sword safely snug in its brown leather hilt, and that he had the mettle to do his allocated task. He had already met with the Grand once before, when he was thirteen, and that meeting had left him breathless. But now he would be one of her Personal guards for the rest of his life. It was inconceivable. Would he ever get used to feeling that power streaking off her, so tangible it was stifling? Yet it was true that he had earned this post. He had always excelled in spell class and his mentals were superb, well above average in fact, and his natural balance and nimble reflexes could not be taught.

Still, with one sweaty hand pressed to the mahogany doors of the North Wing entrance and his head pressed against the cool wood, Markooth could not help but worry that his inadequacies might endanger the Grand. But, summoning his nerve, Markooth stood up straight and rapped on the wood; knock knock—knock-kn-kn-knock-knock-knock. The secret code.

"Identify yourself!"

"Markooth of Glandor, come to serve the Grand."

"Council Password!"

Markooth frowned. He rifled through memories of his orientation Seasons. This should have been ingrained in him dammit! Right now, the Guards inside would be drawing their weapons. "El landurro des Glandor a crucia del Noblucia," he rushed in the Ancient language. "Glandor protect the Grand."

There was a pause and Markooth prayed he'd remembered correctly. For a beat of his racing heart the clunk-thump-clunk of heavy metal bolts being slid back sounded like sword metal clanging against a hilt. But the door fell away soundlessly and was replaced by a burly

man of florid complexion who was almost as wide as the double doors themselves. Except—Markooth looked down upon the man's nest of rust-colored hair—he was so short.

One great paw dragged him inside before the pastel sunlight was bolted out, putting them in virtual darkness, save for the sporadic torches. "Get in, you oaf—what are you trying to do? Let the doors open long enough so the crows can nest?"

"Ah…no. No sir, that was not—"

"Sir? *Sir?* Sir is what you call your Pappies. *Sir* is what you call your schoolroom teacher. Do—I—look—like—either—one—of—the—previous?"

"No…sir."

"Commander! You end every sentence with Commander around here is that understood?"

"Yes, s—Commander."

A displeased sigh "Follow me conscript." Small tree trunk legs pounded up the staircase. Markooth hastily followed, having to force himself slow enough so as he wouldn't trip over the Commander.

"Yes Commander."

"It's 'Aye, Commander' when a direct order is given. Remember that. Now, listen to what I have to say as though your puny life depended on it—because it does."

"Aye Commander." Was that right?

"This is your induction and I will say it only once. You are the best turnip in the field, the pick of the harvest. Put succinctly, you are our elite. Out of all the rest who have trained, you have been chosen." The Commander barked as they marched up the endless, spiraling staircase. He paused.

"Yes sir," Markooth said quickly, because something seemed expected.

The Commander went on. "You, conscript, have been selected to protect the Grand of great Glandor, our municipal God. There is no greater honor and no harder, more consuming challenge than the task set before you. Other than being the blessed Grand herself—Destiny preserve her," he kissed his fist and pushed it hard against his breast. Markooth followed suit. "You will protect the Grand in every capacity available to you; with your physical strength, your mental talent and your spell casting skill. Clear?"

"Yes sir."

The Commander stopped abruptly, his boots clumping against the stair. Markooth braked hastily. "A bit more effort, conscript. I hope you do not intend to serve our beloved Grand—" Another kiss from lips to breast. "With the same kind of lackluster attitude you are displaying at present."

"Yes Sir…No Sir!"

"Hm." The Commander started upwards again.

Markooth glanced downwards and saw that they had climbed a dizzying height already. Strange, he hadn't remembered so many stairs the last time he was here. But that was five seasons gone, he reminded himself.

"And if you are thinking, I can do this, then follow me onwards. But if you are thinking, blast but this sounds too difficult…then hot horse hooey!" The Commander spun around and his face glowed devil red with anger. He twisted back and kept walking. "Because the Fates have ascribed this duty to your person, upon the official request of Destiny which, I might add, the Grand has full faith in." He made another Sign of Faith.

"Yes Sir!"

"Another thing," said the Commander. "You now hereby pledge your life to the Grand, who

has given up her own to safeguard all ours. This is your Allocation till you die, which…well, let me just say I wouldn't plan a partnership." He laughed as the stairs straightened out and they came to another Guard—tall and silver-haired, a fair man in many respects it seemed—waiting patiently before a nameless door. Markooth wagered that the Grand would be behind that.

"One final thing…" said the ginger Commander, coming to rest before the Guard. He dipped one knee and pressed his right fist to his breast before rising again to push their fists against each other's in greeting.

"Yes sir?"

"Meet your Commander." He nodded to the grey-haired Guard with his wise, almond-shaped eyes and knowing half-smile. His casual posture would strike an uninitiated as off-guard. But Markooth noticed that each hand lay on a weapon; the right on a gleaming gold sword hilt and the left behind his back feeling a vicious, pointed cutter.

Markooth raised his eyebrows. He floundered. "But…I thought—" He looked to the rusty-haired Guard who, oddly, avoided his gaze and wandered down the corridor. His eyes met with the other Guard's.

The man smiled benevolently. "Don't mark Indo. We just like to see whether you will unquestionably follow orders." His eyes smiled this time, crinkling kindly. "And it seems that you can. But Indo is a good man and he is also your superior. You will address him as Captain Indo, whereas I am Commander Devenich, and you will always obey him. Is that understood Conscript Markooth?"

"Yes sir. Of course, sir."

"Good. Now take up position at my side and be prepared."

"Aye sir." Markooth stood where he was told and folded his arms behind his back.

"Never leave your weapons unprotected," Devenich murmured. Markooth glanced at him and a *why* formed in his mind.

"Why?" Devenich asked. His grey eyes looked past Markooth and nodded at something. Markooth turned to see what it was.

*Sweet Grand!* Indo was possessed. Features grossly contorted, snarling, demonized, he hurtled down the corridor intent on Markooth's blood. Markooth sought his sword. Gone. "Damn it!" The demon Indo was inches away and its insidious, base cold sank into Markooth's spirit.

He bent—hand darted for his cutter. Gone too. *Blazes.* He had no choice. Gathering his concentration, he had but a blink to think. This wasn't like the practices at all. This was kill or…

The demon hit with deafening force. Hot pain tortured his insides as the demon rummaged for his soul. Without respect.

Markooth doubled over and his eyes started to water. Evil cold killed his mortality, whilst searing pain singed his insides, hurting what was left that was not cold and could feel. Silver flashed wicked in the dull, angry red torchlight and Markooth realized that the demon had snatched his own weapons. He felt such a fool.

A claw lifted high and the blade, raised over his own head, looked sharper than ever. It shot down, on track to slit between his wide eyes. Markooth hurriedly constructed temporary armor. The blade bounced harmlessly—but a breath from his face. He felt a whisper of air and a prod as the sword tried to break his seal. It could not. But it drew back for a second attack. The armor wouldn't last.

The blade descended. It blazed down to stick him through, so the demon could devour his spirit without challenge. Markooth summoned strength and blew it back at the demon. The shock knocked it flying. It thudded against the corridor wall. But it did not stop. In one pulse

beat the demon was back again—in the air and shooting towards him like a murderous arrow.

"Great Grand!" Markooth's mind whirred. Was this still Indo? How could he terminate this threat without slaying Indo himself? But self-preservation drove him to summon his mentals. Almost without thinking, his mind formed a deadly spear. It thrust—nearly too late. The demon was nearly on him again, his blade pointing at him like a joust. Markooth tensed. Indo was impaled upon the mental lance.

"Ugh!" Indo gurgled. The invisible weapon went right through the demon's stomach. And Indo hung in the air. Black blood dripped like viscous tar from the wound and from his mouth. Plopping onto the floor it hissed, charring the wood.

Exhausted, Markooth dropped to the ground with a rattling thud. He was bewildered, trying to soak up what had just happened so he could make sense of it. "My Grand, what have I done?"

"Lesson Two. Always know where your weapons are. An enemy will always try to disarm you—physically and mentally. Congratulations on your promotion. You are now Captain."

The gentle voice belonged to Devenich.

Markooth looked up sharply to see that the Commander was stood in the same relaxed position.

"Sir?"

Devenich shifted his weight, without ever taking his hands from his weapons. "Indo was possessed, conscript. He was a threat to the Grand and you annulled that. Well done."

Devenich's words made Markooth's head ache. "But…but what do we do with him now sir? I mean, he was a man and…well what by Grand do we tell his Immediates?"

"We do not have to tell them anything."

"Sir…what…?" But Markooth looked back to Indo and the body seemed to flicker. The image dissolved and was soon no more. All that remained was the sticky black ooze and Markooth's scattered weapons.

Just then, footsteps thudded up from down the corridor where Indo had first disappeared. He looked perfectly normal and, most importantly, he was definitely not dead. Markooth tensed, worried this was another trick. Mentally, he dragged his weapons up off the floor and back to him.

"Easy." Devenich said. "Lesson three: be able to disregard questionable orders when necessary. And lessons four and five—we are strapped for time this morn—be aware that things are not always as they seem. In other words boy, be on your toes. Finally, although the Grand preserves this perfect land for our enjoyment, there are forces outside our dimension ever threatening to ruin her work. It is your job to aid the Great Grand in her Destiny and protect her from these little pests—such as we have just shown you—so that she can remain concerned with shielding Glandor from the greater evil that lurks beyond."

Indo grinned.

"Any questions, conscript?" Devenitch asked.

"No sir."

"That was the right answer," he said.

Except Markooth did have questions—after an astonishing first morn, just how many more lessons do they have planned? *And how will I know when a demon or an evil is real and not just another lesson?* He felt Devenich glance his way. The man allowed himself a bubble of amusement.

"I'm going to do a walk round," Indo said. "Make sure there's no buggars trying to sneak

in through the defenses." Devenich inclined his head and Indo went back towards the stairs.

The Commander turned his attentions to Markooth. "After this morn, you will never look at anything the same again. You will always be wondering what is mortal, what is demon, what is real and what is illusion."

"I believe I will never take anything for granted again."

"Good. This was the purpose of the lessons—to make you suspicious and wary and, basically, a paranoid wreck. You'll never stop hunting for the truth of things Markooth. You'll sort information twice, thrice—four times ove, and I'll warrant you still won't be satisfied. But you'll be one damn fine Guard. And there's no greater honor I can think of."

"Nor I, si—"

*Spook south south west the main door. Restless too. Somebody get over here. Fast!* The thought came from Indo.

*Go Markooth. I must stay and Guard the Grand,* Devenich urged mentally.

Markooth hurried off. And it all started again.

# TWO

Ry-anne jogged the whole way to Markooth's house. She couldn't help the smile that spread when she passed the lake and remembered the touch of Markooth's body. The East Wing was all commotion and emotion. Pappy Jenn and Mammy Helene had just announced that they were expecting another babby. *Wonder how long that one will last,* Ry-anne wondered and instantly felt ashamed. She slunk out of the celebrations early, giving Pappy Jenn and Mammy Helene the expected awkward embraces.

Pappy Mallun's voice rang in her ears before the East Wing door slammed shut, "Wonderful news…no of course this babby will never replace Kyna…she will always be precious in your heart…"

She stood outside the House a moment, hoping no Family were around to try and extract some easy conversation. It was the anniversary of Kyna's death soon. Somehow, another babby just didn't seem right. She leaned her head back against the cool, sand brick. Its cool texture was refreshing, and she drew in a long, fresh breath of air. The frost of Chill Period was gone, and it was obvious that Warm Period had arrived. Soon it would be Hot Period, the longest of them all, the time when Kyna…

It was still hard to think about. So she pushed off from the wall and ran the familiar path to Markooth's—despite all the protestations he had forbidding her to come to his house. Unfamiliar voices. Ry-anne opened the meal room door and stepped inside. The room was full of men. Kelthro, Markooth, and a funny small ginger man who seemed strong as a horse. Deep, bass laughter rumbled and they all held bowls of ale. Then they saw Ry-anne and all was quiet.

"Ry-anne I told you—" Markooth broke off as the ginger man looked up enquiringly. "Ah… Indo, this is Ry-anne."

"Well it's nice to meet you, Ry-anne. Your sister?" he asked Markooth.

Ry-anne's mouth gaped. She squinted at Markooth. *You better had tell him I'm your Pair,* she thought, but refrained from transmitting it mentally to see what he would do. Kelthro's glance was cold, as if he could wish her away with ill thoughts. She glowered at him. After he'd looked away though.

"No, no. She's my Pair." He left it at that.

Indo's eyebrows raised, probably thinking all the lewd things she'd found out people visualized when they heard they were Pairs. "Oh. I see."

Markooth looked uncomfortable. "Do you want to go in until I'm through chatting?" he asked, indicating the room behind him.

"No." Ry-anne folded her arms. Kelthro scowled, obviously wishing that she would burst into flames. His anger licked her, even from across the room.

"I'll just go and check on Cate," he said to Markooth, playing nice and charming in front of his guest. "If you will excuse me, sir Indo. It was marvelous to meet your acquaintance."

"And you, Sir Kelthro. We will meet another time I warrant."

Kelthro bowed his head respectfully.

Ry-anne knew that Kelthro was only ducking out of the room because she was in it. And that he was leaving before his anger would erupt all over his guest and spoil his reputation. Shame he didn't practice such self-control when there was nobody but Immediates about, she thought. Kelthro moved to place his unfinished bowl of ale in the wash basin.

"Let me get that," Ry-anne said and took it from him.

Kelthro frowned a storm down upon her but let her take his bowl before disappearing, nodding a composed goodbye to Indo. Ry-anne quickly ran her finger around the rim and wiped it on her robe's neckline before dropping the dish aside the wash basin.

"How come I haven't seen you around before?" Ry-anne asked Indo. "Are you Family?"

"Why yes, I am. My Immediates live in the West Wing, but I have alternative accommodations now—you see I'm a Guard to the Grand," he said, pronouncing his words slowly and smiling a fake smile that people did for dumb babbies.

"Oh." Ry-anne looked away. "Markooth, can we go to Pantherea yet? I'm starving."

Markooth looked from Ry-anne to Indo and back again. He shifted his weight and cleared his throat. "You know, I'm just having a conversation if you wouldn't mind waiting," he said, trying to sound gentle.

But Ry-anne heard, *Look I'm talking to somebody important, and you're embarrassing me in front of my wonderful, red, adult friend so just git*. She tried not to flush and put all her energy into staring at Markooth, to make him feel more uncomfortable. Indo cleared his throat and Ry-anne wondered whether she should do it too, just to make everybody even more uneasy.

"So Ry-anne, have you been allocated yet?"

Ry-anne opened her mouth to speak but Markooth didn't give her the chance. "Actually, she's being allocated in three eve's. Aren't you, Ry-anne?"

She didn't answer.

"Oh, I see." Indo said. "Any idea what your path will be? What would you like?"

She shrugged, sensing Indo look at Markooth, who swallowed and tried to encourage her with his eyes to be more polite. "Ry-anne?"

She huffed. "Oh for Grand's sake," and slammed out of the meal room door. Markooth would come after her, right? Tell her to come back inside and say that he hadn't meant to make her feel stupid and unwanted and babbyish and—he didn't come. Ry-anne stalked off to the lake, her teeth gritted, getting angry at how her anger dissolved with each blasted step. She almost saw the situation from Markooth's point of view but was too stubborn to let anything as crazy as that become reality and tried to stay mad.

"What the demons do you want?"

The figure in black crouched by the lake under the moonlight, lying in wait for her.

Ry-anne screamed.

"Holy Grand! There's no need to deafen me, girl!"

It was only Lefus, alone by the black water. On second thought, that was bad enough. With his dark-hair, darker soul and black eyes, Lefus was the complete antithesis of sweet-natured, blonde, golden-eyed Markooth. And he made Ry-anne feel funny.

"What are you doing here anyway?" she blurted.

Lefus cast her an indulgent look. "I shall allow you a moment to retract that comment when you realize how stupid it sounds."

"Huh?"

"Well what are *you* doing here, young Maiden? Isn't it far past your bedtime? It's none of your concern what I'm doing here."

Ry-anne's hands indignantly went to her hips. "Shut up and get yourself lost."

"Get your*self* lost, child. This is a public lake—I have every right to be here."

She sighed, glaring death at Lefus' unmovable figure. But he wasn't even looking. He would go on sitting, right there in her spot, regardless of whether she went away or not.

"What's troubling the ice maiden? Did you and lover brother have a spat?"

"I ought to push you in that lake and drown you," she growled. Lefus looked as though she had struck him.

He stood up and towered over her, seeming to blot out the moons. Lefus was tall, taller even than Markooth, and where Markooth was lithe and lean, Lefus was all stocky muscle. She tried to meet his eye but those deep, black pits were mires of something unmentionable—and they didn't permit trespassers.

Ry-anne was sure Lefus was on the verge of exploding. The something in him that was caged was bursting to be taken out on someone. But he tamed his anger, and when it became clear he wasn't going to speak, she told him to get out of the way.

"You say something, babby?" Back was the amused stare and that half-curl, half-snarl of his mouth that he called a smile.

"Get out my way," she said meekly, eyes glued to the grass that her sandals were squashing.

"Oh well, seeing as you asked it so politely of me." He stepped aside.

Exasperated and more than a little unnerved, Ry-anne turned her back and started away from the lake. "Oh, don't go on my account," he whispered, his deep voice slithering up her spine and creeping into her ears.

"You're pathetic," she spat, not bothering to turn back.

"You'll tell on me to your lover I'll warrant," he taunted. Ry-anne's ears burned. She and Markooth were not…not yet…it wasn't allowed and they weren't really like…that…yet. Sure, quick mental kisses were just about legal, but Ry-anne knew that their age gap prevented Markooth from doing even that. Whether he felt like doing it, it was hard to tell. Sometimes he would look at her all funny and conflicted. Then he would get angry and walk away like she was diseased. And then he would pound his fist against a wall when he thought she wasn't sensing him. Except she always felt it when he hurt, physically or otherwise. So did he think of her as a lover? He kept that part of himself shielded good and bottled up tight, which took a lot of energy. But no, he never let that one out, no matter how much or how sneakily she delved.

"I bet you six donkeys, four and a half cow's testicles and Grey's heart that you tell on me!" Lefus yelled.

"Oh shut up," Ry-anne whispered and hurried away. There were more important things to be getting on with this eve.

* * *

The doors in her section of East Wing were all closed. Ry-anne could hear people chatting behind Pappy Jenn's door, the clink of goblets and the bubble of laughter. Ry-anne crept past and went to her own room. Gwyneth's door drifted open and she staggered out, draping her arms around Ry-anne, who nearly toppled under the weight.

"Gwyn! What's the matter with you—get off me!"

Gwyneth laughed out of her nose. The hot air tickled Ry-anne's neck, where Gwyneth's head lay. "Not much Ry, not too much."

"Uck! You've been taking the ale again, haven't you?"

Gwyneth raised her head and grinned. One of her top teeth caught her bottom lip and stuck there, so that when she closed her mouth it still showed, making her look gormless.

"By the Grand, Gwyn. This is too much. Why are you hurting yourself like this?" With one

arm round Gwyneth's waist and one around her shoulder, Ry-anne hauled her back to chambers before Mammy Gamine could get a look.

She dropped Gwyneth down on the bed, unable to do it lightly, for Gwyneth

leaned her entire weight on Ry-anne. The mattress bounced a couple of times before she was still. Ry-anne looked at her elder sister. For the first time she really saw her. Her blonde hair was sprawled on the bed just as she was—every which way—but it was darker than it used to be because of the grease. Ry-anne sniffed. Grand! When was the last time Gwyneth had washed? She sighed. Gwyneth's pale cheeks were unusually flushed from the ale and she giggled to herself, though her eyes were shut. Ry-anne somehow teased the sheets out from under her sister and spread them over the top.

"Mammy Huln. Mee Huln wntd…sposed to…"

"What's that Gwyn? What are you trying to say?"

Gwyneth moaned and rubbed her nose with one loose hand. "Sposed to go wiv Keen dat day."

"You were supposed to go with Kyna?"

Gwyneth nodded sleepily.

"What day?"

"That day!" The face was imploring even though her eyes were still tight shut. She settled. "But sneaked off to the rose…rose gardn wiv Davv—Davv…Davvy."

Ry-anne inhaled. Exhaled. Oh Gwyneth, she thought and gazed on her wretched sister. *You never told me.* "There wasn't…" she swallowed with difficulty as the old pain started to tighten her throat. "There wasn't anything you could have done, Gwyn. Even if you had have been there."

"But shuddve bn there. Sposed tve been. Shuddve. Better mentals'n you."

Ry-anne knelt by the bedside and took her hand. Gwyneth threw her gesture away and rolled onto her side. "Gwyn."

"Shuddve been there!" she cried and a sob caught her throat. "Gettout!"

"Gwyneth, don't be—"

"Out! Want t'be alone!" She tossed a pillow. It missed completely, but Ry-anne escaped from the room before anything else was thrown.

Ry-anne closed the door against the memories and leaned back against it briefly. She shook her head clear and went to her own bed and sat heavily, thinking awhile before reaching underneath to take out a small spell chest. First, she felt around for Markooth, to see whether he was concentrating on her at all. But he didn't appear to be. She got the impression that he was in the barn with Grey.

Quickly, Ry-anne took out a little wooden bowl from the chest and then used a razor shell she had stolen from class to scrape her robe where she had wiped Kelthro's spit. There was nothing to see on the shell, but she knew it was there and it was the caster's intent that was the most important thing. Like if the caster said a rose petal stood for love then it would be so. But this spell was not designed to bring love. Quite the opposite in fact.

Ry-anne transferred the long razor shell, which looked more like a vicious claw, to her left hand and poured a dot of water from a tiny, stoppered jar. Just water, nothing else. Then she shook the shell in the water to free it of any residue and carefully broke the end of it, which could not be used for scraping again, since it would be contaminated.

Her heart sped up and she started to have second thoughts. But she shoved the doubts away. No. It was right. She crushed the piece of shell that she had broken off and brushed the

fragments into the water. After packing the rest of the box away back under the bed, Ry-anne sat up straight, ready to speak the spell.

"*Las intencia del incantacia ester; Kelthro den Glandor y'a del mucuso den Kelthro del profirer ester.* This spell is for Kelthro of Glandor and his mucus is the proof of this." Ry-anne unstopped the water jar again and held it ready. Her heart thudded, and she tried to stop her hands from shaking. Was this wrong?

"*Porra eccha mallia serr meturo surro unia notra, serr resuvoiraire trioa surro serrseem, y'a donc esteraire a del tempheuria ester aquay'a finisio.* For each hurt he inflicts on another, so will he receive it threefold upon himself until this water runs dry." Then Ry-anne lowered the water jar and let it trickle into the wooden bowl, coloring it darker as it reached the top and her water jar emptied.

"*Y'a serr esteraire, y'a serr esteraire, y'a serr esteraire.* And so will it be, and so will it be, and so will it be." She lay a cloth over the bowl and placed it on her dresser beside the bed, where the sun would warm it in the morn times. It wouldn't last long—two days at most given the position of the water—but if Kelthro did hurt Markooth, then he would only be hurting himself. Next, Ry-anne peeled off her robe and dumped it on the floor, too tired to pick it up properly. She had her best night's sleep for seasons, except for the usual nightmare.

* * *

*Ry-anne! What by Grand did you do!*

The mental woke her before the bells and dragged her upright immediately. Her internal clock told her that it was still dark outside, though not as dark as in the heart of the night.

*Look at this!*

Image of Kelthro. Writhing in agony by the barn. Face purple and bumpy. Lip split and bleeding.

*Well?* Markooth sent a scouring anger accompanying his question. *What have you to say—or would you rather I informed the Judiciary?*

Ry-anne sent out calmness. *He deserved it,* she half-thought, but transmitted; *Don't be mad—I'm sorry.*

*I heard that! Deserved it, did he? Just wait until…*

Intense hate lashed out at him**.** *Until what? You lay a hand on me Markooth and I'll…*

Markooth trickled the feeling of tranquility into Ry-anne's mind**.** *I would never hurt you, but I just do not understand why you would do such a thing.* She could tell he was still furious.

*Because I'm sick of him! Always beating you—and for no reason!*

*He does have reasons—*

*Like what? Surprise me!*

She felt his hesitation**.** *I cannot.* And then came the old, familiar sadness that she could never figure out.

*Well that makes a change. You keep yourself so closed off these days.*

*I protect you.*

*You shun our Pairing.*

*Stuff and nonsense—and you know it.*

Ry-anne flinched as Markooth's mind wandered. Her own head flashed with second hand images—the lake**.** The water. Their bodies…and his arms around her. Her hair smells of strawberry. Then came the anger.

*What the—Markooth, what was that all about? What is this anger you have towards me?*

*It has absolutely nothing to do with you.* Markooth projected tenderness.

*Well then—*

*Just collapse the spell, Ry-anne. My father's in agony, and don't say you don't care. You're not that heartless.*

*I am.*

*Stop it. Collapse it right now—what did you use? Water or candles?*

Ry-anne was reluctant. *Water.*

*Then tip it away and I'll bring up a healing spell.*

*Does he…does he know it was me that cast it? Not that I care.*

She felt Markooth's exasperation**.** *He doesn't know for definite, though I'm sure he could guess—and no, I won't tell him.*

*I don't care if he does know it was me. Tell him if you like.*

*I will then,* Markooth sent.

*Fine.*

*Fine.*

There was silence. And then, *We'll go to Pantherea this eve, if you like. I haven't had the opportunity to speak to you about my first morn in the North Wing.*

*Mm, whatever.*

*Just tip the water away and that will relieve some of his symptoms to start with.* To soften the instruction, he filtered in warmth and lit up her aura with heat**.** *Bye.*

*See you this coming eve then? I have my allocation robe fitting first though.*

*Of course***.** The warmth of his presence lingered long after he was gone**.**

Ry-anne stretched up and pulled back the window doors and then yanked the cord to open her window slats. She reached over to the dresser, picked up the spell bowl and chucked the water out of the window before snuggling up back in bed.

# THREE

Pantherea town was alive. There were flame throwers, torch jugglers and flute players. The smell of roasting chicken wafted towards Ry-anne as she and Markooth came to an open fire on the street side. Pantherea town was always very busy, but this eve was the final day of the welcome to Warm Period Festival, and the square was literally jammed.

"Are you hungry?" Markooth asked over the roar of laughter and music. Drums started up.

Ry-anne patted her stomach. "Always."

"Two please, sir," Markooth said to the vendor who gave him two chicken breasts in one linen napkin. He asked for a spare napkin before handing over the trades.

"That was expensive, wasn't it?" Ry-anne said when they edged away, trying not to push into people. The vendor poked some more meat on the skewer above his small fire.

"But I'll bet it's worth it," said Markooth as handed Ry-anne a portion.

She bit through the skin into soft, hot chicken, flavored with butter and garlic. Juices ran down her chin. "Oops," she dabbed them away, chewing. "Mm. That's gorgeous."

He smiled, and there again was that annoyingly handsome face. The sparkle in those gentle, golden eyes and that easy grin. Ry-anne held back the urge to wipe chicken grease from his lips. *Holy Grand I sound like Mammy Gamine!* It was hardly a romantic thought to be having was it?

Markooth looked away, a little embarrassed, and Ry-anne flushed tomato. She was letting her feelings slip again. Ry-anne felt Markooth's spirit moving away to allow her some space. She was torn between wanting to apologize for those thoughts and knowing that it would just embarrass the both of them even more.

There was an awkward silence—there seemed to be a lot lately. They strolled along, bumping into merrymakers from time to time as they headed over to the bonfire early in the hope of getting a good view. Soon there would be a comedy play and songs.

"Muffins! Get your delicious hot rhubarb muffins!" cried an old crone with a bent back.

"Yack. These townies certainly have strange tastes," Ry-anne muttered as they walked past the old woman.

"Fredra! How go you?" Markooth called, grinning broadly.

"Sir Glandor. What a marvelous surprise. Haven't seen you now since last Hot Period. How are you keeping?"

"I'm well, I'm well. I didn't expect to see you here."

The woman adjusted the basket of pastries she carried. "Oh, Lily and I just came over to enjoy the festival and sell our wares. I dare say I won't be making the trip again though, Sir Glandor—my poor knees would certainly have something to say about that now!"

Markooth laughed and seemed about to say more. Ry-anne tutted and introduced herself, seeing as he had forgotten to.

"Good eve, Fredra. I'm Ry-anne."

"Well hello there lassy. How's about a nice muffin—?"

"Oh I'm sorry," said Markooth, remembering his yacky high-born manners at long last. "Ry-anne this is Fredra. She owns a bakery stall in Ricefield town. Fredra this is Ry-anne, my Pair."

Ry-anne glowed. My Pair. It sounded nice.

"Pair, eh? Well this delight is free to you then missy. And aren't you a pretty thing, too? Here you are, hon." The old woman handed her a smelly rhubarb muffin with shaking fingers. Ry-anne took it awkwardly in the same hand that held the roasted chicken, which she subsequently lost grip of. It landed with a splat on the worn grass.

"Wonderful. I can't thank you enough," she said, hoping it didn't come out quite as rude as it was meant.

"I trust Lily is well," Markooth said.

"Oh she's grown up just beautiful, Sir Glandor. Don't you agree? She'll run the Family bakery well in a few years."

"Is she here?"

"Just up yonder by the bonfire. She's never seen the Festival before—never managed to persuade my old knees to come!" The woman cackled.

Markooth kissed her goodbye and said that he must go and say hello to Lily. Ry-anne thought it unfair that an old woman got a kiss from Markooth, when she was refused even a mental one. And a non Glandor at that!

"Fredra said I was pretty," said Ry-anne. "She must be a bit crazed huh?"

"Fredra's blind," Markooth said seriously.

"Really?" She tutted again and sighed. "Well that explains it then I suppose. Filthy horse woman."

Markooth snorted and exploded into laughter. "Grand, you're gullible."

"What?" Ry-anne's eyes widened. It took some effort to close her gaping mouth. "So she's not blind then? Markooth?"

He grinned and wouldn't answer as he squeezed through the jostling crowds. It was all Ry-anne could do to keep up. She could hear the large bonfire spit and snap. The fire seemed to blister her face as she pretended not to watch Markooth look about for Lily, or to see his eyes beam when they rested on a mousy-haired waif of a girl swamped in scrubbed bare robes. She took a nibble of the rhubarb muffin and expected it to be ghastly but instead found it to be rather interesting.

"Come on," Markooth said and dragged her by the wrist over to the girl. Ry-anne tripped over a wooden plate somebody had discarded. It had an old chicken bone on it and Ry-anne sent it and her muffin flying.

"Typical," she muttered, before greeting Lily. But the girl continued to stare straight ahead, seeming hypnotized by the fire. Ry-anne shook her head. "Well blazes to you, too. She's proper ignorant Markooth."

"No. She's deaf and mute."

"Oh." Well she flaming would be wouldn't she?

Markooth tapped Lily's shoulder and her eyes jumped on him nervously. Her solemn face split into a grin. Her eyebrows raised so high Ry-anne wondered whether they would disappear into her mousy hair and never come back.

"Hi Lily," he said. "You enjoying yourself here?"

She nodded deeply. Vigorously. Ry-anne turned away as Markooth asked more questions and she either shook her head or nodded or shrugged expressively. Ry-anne wished she were allowed to wear the more revealing robes that even Gwyneth wasn't really supposed to wear. She was roasting all bound up in this wrap and eve-robe. Sweat beads clung to her lip and her underarms had grown sticky. Suddenly, she started to feel a little unsteady and decided to get away from the fire, hoping it might also help to assuage that little growl of fear upsetting her

tummy as she watched that girl smile at her Pair. Strange, but the mute's hair sometimes looked blonde, not murky brown. Trick of the light, Ry-anne decided.

But she shouldn't be sinful. If Markooth liked the dummy, then it ought to proceed. Those were the rules. They were just kind of hard to follow. She turned to Markooth to tell him that she was going to stand away from the fire, when—

Her heart hopped from an electric jolt of shock. Pain stabbed her in the gut. But more than that…bewilderment.

Markooth and the mute girl were unclothed and writhing on the grass—except the grass was now a worn old bed. Blondish hair spilled out onto the sheets, beautiful and waving, cool under the magnificent glow of the twin moons. Markooth's smooth skin was oddly dark, even though the fire ought to be making it glow. The smell of wet grass and clothes entered Ry-anne's nostrils.

"Ry-anne, say hi to Lily," said Markooth.

She turned to his voice, which was weirdly more to her right than where he actually lay. But when she looked, he was completely clothed and smiling like everything was normal. So too was the girl, whose hair was most definitely brown. Their faces doubled, merged, flew apart. Ry-anne's head swam.

And then she fainted.

* * *

The goblet of cool water was a grateful sight. "Thanks." Her voice was croaky. She rubbed her eyes with one hand. "Grand, I feel stupid. I can't believe how I must have embarrassed myself—and you."

"Not your fault," Markooth said. "I'm sorry, I should have made us stand further back."

Ry-anne gave a dry laugh. "Because I take so well to being told what to do, don't I?"

She had come to on a step in front of a closed store, head between her knees. Markooth had obviously carried her there out of the way of the heat and the surging crowds. Thankfully the dumb girl—she shoved the memory aside—was not there.

"How do you feel?"

She sighed and rested tired elbows on her knees. "Oh, a little woozy. But not too bad." A deep, dull ache was wreaking havoc in her gut. She clutched it absently.

"Good. Want to tell me what really happened?"

"Want to not talk to me as though you're not my Pappy?"

"Sorry."

"Stop always saying sorry, too."

"Sorry." She looked at him and watched him button his lip lest another one pop out. "But what happened? Have you been fainting a lot lately?"

"No," she said very quickly. Markooth came to sit down beside her on the step. He didn't look convinced. His bare arm rested against hers and she could feel it warm through her eve-robe. For once, she moved her own arm away and tried to make it look casual.

"I know something's going on that you're not telling me. And when it concerns your health, well then you're either going to tell me easily or I'll go in and get it myself. Come Ry-anne, what's going on in there?" He tapped a finger against her forehead and smiled.

Ry-anne shook her head. "Just…I don't know." She sighed and pushed her hands through the front of her hair, realizing that much of it had broke free of the painstakingly braided plait.

"Some rooms, places—even people sometimes—make me feel…strange. I sort of go hot and my head gets all stuffy and I can't breathe. I see things, Markooth. Things that aren't really there. I think there's something wrong with me."

Markooth rolled his lips inward, trying to restrain a smile. Her anger rose instantly.

He hastily projected calming feelings. "It isn't anything you need to worry about. There's nothing wrong with you. You're just having visions. It's a gift. And used right it can protect people, save them—damn, maybe even Glandor—from harm!"

"Oh 'just' having visions, am I? Marvelous. Just visions of you and me and then that girl—no, I'm not saying any more. And don't go sneaking either. Right?"

"What did you see?"

She flapped her hands. "Please stop. I don't want to talk about that. It's nothing much, really—and you mustn't go looking in on me. You solemn promise?"

"I solemn promise." He pressed his right hand to his breast, face ultra-serious. She glared. "Listen, I know what's happening must feel weird and horrible and maybe even scary. But visions never harm, they inform. So there's nothing to be afraid of, and you're most definitely not going mad, right?" Ry-anne nodded reluctantly. "Right?" Markooth repeated. "Solemn promise?"

She pushed him off the step. He counteracted it with mentals and stood up gracefully. "I'll let you away with that seeing as you've just fainted."

"Good of you."

"Come on, I'd better get you back to the House. Grey's tied not far from here. You have your Allocation this next morn. Are you looking forward to it?"

"Oh yes. As much as I look forward to my own Sending to the Dimension of the Dead. I know I'm only going to be a stable girl or something, so I don't see why I should bother going." Markooth gave her a steady look and received a shrug in response.

The persistent ache in her gut made her want to groan out loud. To curl up like a child and sleep it off. Perhaps the chicken had been sour.

* * *

The Grand adjusted her position in the old chair and got ready. She closed her eyes and licked her lips, swallowed as she drew her concentration together. Her mind went purposely to Ry-anne and focused in tight on the girl. She was in her room, being dressed for the Allocation.

The Grand watched. The next important event in the girl's life was about to be played out…

* * *

Ry-anne ushered the servant girl out of the chamber impatiently. She wanted to be alone with the glass. First, she slipped her hands down the oil-silk of the Allocation robe. It was grey and serious, but a beautiful cut and the most grown up a robe she had ever been allowed into. Instead of swathing her up to the chin, this robe started at her shoulders, crossed over her chest and wound around the back before wrapping over her stomach, hips, thighs and calves, where it was then pinned and some wonder of sewing caused it to pucker out in a nice curve at her ankles.

She twisted in the glass to see the back before staring again at the front. The darker grey fabric of her under-wrap was purposefully visible at her chest. If she had not worn one so high, as the adults did not, then you would have been able to see the top of her breasts—not that she

had any. Ry-anne touched one hand to her chest and found the hard swellings that could never be mistaken for bosoms to be incredibly tender. Coupled with that insistent pain in her lower abdomen—which occasionally stabbed with a seemingly murderous intent—Ry-anne wondered whether she might actually begin the Cycle in the near future. The thought made her half excited and half depressed. Excited because it would mean she was finally becoming a woman as opposed to being some tree-climbing babby. But depressed because she had this sneaking suspicion that her Cycle might just make its first appearance half way through the Allocation.

Should she shove a piece of cloth inside the under-wrap to soak it up if it did come?

"Ry-anne!"

Mammy Gamine's snap gave her a jolt. "I come!" She forced her heart to slow and decided there was no time to mess with anything.

She took one last look in the glass. Dark brown eyes searched her own face—frightened eyes that glittered with excitement. She would find out her path this morn! With great effort, she tugged the ribbon out of her hair, which had become all knotted up as usual. Her head throbbed, protesting against her hair being loose when it was used to being up and scraped out of the way. Next, she massaged her scalp and furiously tried to smooth her hair into something presentable.

"I hope you've got your hair down Ry-anne, like a proper young lady!" Mammy Gamine called, thumping about the corridor getting things and people ready.

"I have!" She dared a sigh, certain that Mammy couldn't hear her.

"No, not those sandals, Hann. Go and tell Pappy Mallun to find your new ones," Mammy said quietly, then louder, "Because this is an important occasion, you know, love? And if Markooth's Immediates are there then we have to make the right impression."

"Oh who cares what they think?" Ry-anne blurted, worrying now about seeing Kelthro after that spell she had cast on him. Just feign ignorance—Markooth won't have told on you. That she was sure of.

*How are you faring?* Markooth asked from back over in his house where he was getting dressed.

*Excited mostly. Are your Immediates coming?*

*Except Mother. She doesn't feel up to it. Sorry.*

*Not to worry.* Ry-anne was actually relieved. Cate was a strange woman. Hard to read. All bottled up with her mind clamped down.

*See you afterwards and good luck. Want me to stay with you during the Allocation, or would you prefer some privacy?* Markooth sent.

*I don't mind. But it's always better when you're with me. Gotta rush—bye for now.*

Markooth said farewell, but of course he was never really gone. He was always there on the fringe of her consciousness like a voice in her head, a twin she would always be linked with. Oh you could shut parts off—keep certain doors closed, and Markooth did, she knew. She sensed them even though they were barricaded. But that was all right, really. People had a right to space.

But their whole life long they would sense each other, no matter where they were, would know always what the other half of the Pair was doing. She saw all his flaws—the greed, the jealousy and the anger—but she could never stay angry. She could never hate her Pair—even if he were evil. Because she knew him inside out and they were *fused.* She anticipated the workings of his mind and they would start breathing on the same rhythm, in tune. Never would she get to know another one person that way—even though she was good at sensing. And a Pair was always special, even if she did take lovers—something which Markooth clearly wanted to do.

"Ry-anne! The Priestess will be awaiting us!" Pappy Johann this time.

"Yes Pappy!"

*Better go, Ry. Stop being vain and get—I'm sure you look lovely as always,* Markooth said.

Ry-anne tried to resist the pleasure-feelings his compliment created. But she knew he would only feel her trying not to feel flattered—she didn't like shutting him out as he often did to her—and let them flow.

She rushed out of the chamber—everybody was waiting. Except Mammy Helene, who had never really tried to get out of bed since Kyna had died. Kyna. *Grand.* A sharp shock of pain went through her—amazement that she really was dead. It was unfathomable sometimes—even after all these seasons—but yes, she *really was dead.* The loss was too huge to even be overwhelming. It was just there.

Sympathy, applied like a massage, comforted Ry-anne.

She sent Markooth a quick thank you.

"At long last!" cried Pappy Mallun, who was smarted up in his black special robes as were all the other Pappies. Pappy Johann gave her a squeeze.

"All grown up," he said, clutching her harder even as she shirked away, protesting that he would crease her robe.

Pappy Jenn smiled, but it couldn't get rid of that broken look in his eyes. "You certainly look the part."

"Thank you, Father Jenn."

"My, we are all grown up aren't we?" he said and smiled.

"Come along now," Mammy Gamine said. "This isn't a stage performance, we have to get on down to the prayer room. I suspect the Priestess has been waiting on your faffing for some time now."

"Yes, yes, yes," Ry-anne said as the whole herd of them—all halfie brothers and sister, Fathers and Mother—made their way to the prayer room.

Mammy Gamine gave her a smart *whap*. "No smarts this morn, Ry-anne. Of all morns, please Grand, not today."

"Yes, yes."

The prayer room was past the battle room, which always gave Ry-anne the fingers-sneaking-up-your-spine sneaks. Along the way they encountered more Family who passed on congratulations and greetings to the party. Finally, Ry-anne escaped into the prayer room and gratefully shut out their noise.

"I apologize for my tardiness, Priestess."

"You are forgiven, my daughter." An easy voice. No irritation. And Ry-anne remembered the voice through a hazy image from childhood. Her Pairing.

*That's right,* Markooth sent. *Lyelle, I think.*

The very same Priestess. Grand it was hard to mark an individual Priestess, given that they all hid inside hoods and itchy brown robes.

Just please don't let me have to train to be a Priestess and then I shall be content. And not a stable girl, either. Markooth will never want to kiss me if I stink of horse…

*Of course I'll kiss you!*

*Hush up!*

Amused, he retreated.

*Maybe a nurse or something, like Gwynnie.* That seemed easy. Just dab people's brows with cold cloths—or hot—depending on the illness. Throw a few good health spells out and there you

have it. Yes, that ought to be easy enough. A nurse was respected, too—she could manage that. Markooth seemed to find that funny. She slapped him down in her mind with a terse *This is serious!* and *I'll get you later if you don't hush it*. He took the hint.

The Priestess began, rabbiting away about what a momentous occasion this was, what a marvelous landmark this Season would be. Finally, when Ry-anne's knees were about to give away, she wandered on over to the important part. "Ry-anne, the Fates have conferred with Destiny and your path has been decided…"

# FOUR

Markooth focused half of his attention on what was happening in the prayer room, the other half on the awkward group of Immediates. Ry-anne's stood separate, near as skin to the doors and anxious. Markooth's stood back from them, with himself in the middle, trying not to be suffocated by the tension. Ry-anne's Immediates had accepted *him* well enough, especially after Kyna's death. They'd been so grateful she had somebody to keep an eye on her moods. Unfortunately, Markooth's birth parents were not quite as gracious.

There had been some attempts at conversation. Gamine had inquired about Kelthro's health only to receive a muttered reply, and she and Josephine had sparked up a chat about the weather only for Kelthro to glare her into silence. After that, all conversation dwindled.

Gwyneth was flirting with him again, right in front of Davvy, who had sidled up a few moments ago. She was pretty, admittedly. No, not pretty, but exquisite in a way Ry-anne could never be. All fragile and feminine in a way that made you want to protect her.

*Markooth!* Ry-anne exclaimed and then projected mock hurt.

But she knew he wasn't blind. Communal living was fine. Sharing work and families was just great. Why have one mother and one father to look after and provide for a small family, when there could be thirty…forty parents, all looking out for the children? All working for the good of the Family and each other. And Pairs, well Pairs were special, but sometimes people needed an outlet. To escape from somebody who knew your every thought and breath and desire. And that's why lovers were accepted…needed even.

But it wasn't acceptable to become involved with a Pair's Immediates. That was forbidden, made of lust and selfish need.

"I do worry about what will become of young Ry-anne," Gamine said then. "I know I shouldn't ask Markooth, but can you not tell us something of what the Priestess is saying? Go on."

"Gamine!" That was Johann. "Pair business is private. How would you like it if Markooth asked how we entertained ourselves last eve? Hm?"

A secret smile came to Gamine's thin lips, which she tried to check. She nudged Johann playfully and he planted a kiss in her hair. That was Johann, always the diffuser. Always the one you wanted around when there was trouble brewing.

*A bit like you,* Ry-anne mentioned, absently.

She was bored in the prayer room, with the Priestess babbling on about landmarks and occasions and so on and so forth. Markooth sent back encouragement.

"I wonder if she'll be a nurse like Gwynnie. She's good at spells you know. Very good. Always has been," Gamine said. Markooth snatched a glance at his father, whose face twitched. "Or she could be a teacher, I suppose. She likes bossing people—I suppose you've noticed."

*Don't you answer that,* came Ry-anne's warning when Gamine's question, processed by his thoughts, reached her.

"I wouldn't reply to that if I were you," Mallun joked.

"Or she might be a grounds boy—I mean girl. She likes the muck," Andee quipped, elbowing his shiny new Pair—a small, shy blonde girl who was two Seasons younger than Andee's fourteen. The girl smiled at the ground and didn't quite have the courage to meet anybody's eye.

"That's enough from you, boy," Jenn said, completely destroying Andee's credibility.

Markooth smiled at everyone, but he was really with Ry-anne in the prayer room. It was getting to the important bit. *The fates have conferred with Destiny and your path has been decided…*

"By the Grand!" Markooth cried. His jaw hung open, totally limp.

Everybody stared.

* * *

Ry-anne was numb. "I'm sorry. Can you…w…would you repeat that please?"

The Priestess smiled benevolently. "I know. The idea will certainly take some getting used to, but my door is always open if you need counsel. Rest assured, the Fates are right in this. Go, tell your Immediates and friends. Celebrate. You will return to me this next morn and we will begin your training."

"But…but why me?" She took a deep breath when it became obvious that the priestess was no longer answering questions. "Tomorrow then. Here?" The Priestess smiled that wise, easy smile and nodded. "Right." Somehow, Ry-anne managed to turn around and persuade her legs to cross the distance to the doors. She fumbled with the knob, slipped twice before getting the cursed thing open.

Everybody stared.

Mammy Gamine greeted her with eager eyes, the forefront of fifteen other expectant gazes—even Markooth's Immediates were more than a little curious. Kelthro was probably wondering whether she was going to disgrace their name by becoming a stable girl.

"Well?" Mammy Gamine clutched each of Ry-anne's arms. "What is it? Are you to be a medic a teacher a—"

Moving through a whirl of numbness, Ry-anne extracted herself and shook her head. Not looking at anybody, she went for Markooth.

Gamine was baffled. "What could be so bad?"

Markooth tried to offer an answer. But he couldn't. He just shook his head and moved away with Ry-anne.

"Probably is a grounds girl," Andee snickered.

"Hush!" said Jenn before giving him a clout.

With Markooth at her side, Ry-anne walked towards the secondary meal room where they had arranged to go for something to eat and drink. Celebrate, the Priestess had said. Not likely.

Like a funeral procession, they all moved into the meal room and took seats around tables of set out bread, sweetmeats, nuts, village cakes and goblets of ale. Certainly, Ry-anne felt like it was the end of her life. Solemn faces, intrigued faces, and worried faces were all around. But Ry-anne had no idea what her own face was reflecting. She bent over the table and hid it in her arms.

Markooth was trying to get in, trying to offer reassurances, but everything was all blurred and she couldn't listen. Gwyneth and Gamine crept close.

"Why won't she tell us, Markooth?" Gwyneth asked.

Gamine gently touched her shoulder. "You can tell me, honey. We won't think badly. Come on, love."

Ry-anne bit down on her lip. Hard. She wanted to cry—to feel *something*. But she was totally and amazingly numb. "I can't," she told Gamine in a whisper and got up. The stool

scraped against the polished wood floor—a sharp sound in the silent hall. Nobody tried to stop her from leaving.

"Should you not go after her, Markooth?" Josephine asked.

"No. She needs time some time to think this through."

Ry-anne was suddenly unable to breathe. Her robe was too tight. Suffocating. Grand! She bashed the doors open and ran outside into the open air. Standing there, in the quad that was the center of each Wing, she tried to catch her breath. Markooth was still nearby, a reassuring presence that barely ever left—unless he was doing something that he was embarrassed about. But even Markooth couldn't make this right. Things would never be the same again now. Not ever.

* * *

Ry-anne greeted the next morn with the same sick, dead feeling of Kyna's sending off. She went to the meal room for breakfast and sat in undisturbed silence with her Immediates. Markooth was not there—his Immediates always ate alone. She pushed away the porridge and sipped at some berry juice before grabbing an orange. She didn't think she could manage anything else.

Today she'd ask the Priestess whether it was all a mistake. It must be. She was far too irresponsible for such a job. Why, after Kyna—and its familiar, gut-pain ache—she had never been able to use physical mentals again. She would convene with Markooth and use them to figure out a person, but she would never participate in mental exercise again, no matter how much Moody tried to press her into it. Surely it would be ridiculous to allow…it would just be ridiculous. The whole thing was ridiculous!

Immediates looked on surreptitiously as unsteady fingers sliced into an orange. She halved it once and then halved those pieces and brought one quarter to her mouth, glancing up for the first time. The whole table watched. Their eyes flickered away like naughty children. Only Father Johann's gaze lingered. He smiled, but Ry-anne went back to the orange and sucked on the sweet, tangy fruit. Juices dribbled down her chin. She cussed, wiped her face with a napkin and looked around the table again. Again, all those eyes pretended not to be watching.

Ry-anne tutted. She set the orange down and wrung her sticky fingers on the napkin. "I must go," she said on a sigh. "I have to ask the Priestess whether she made a mistake."

"Oh Ry-anne," Mammy Gamine said. "It's all right—"

"No!" She shouted, much louder than she ought. The meal room hushed instantly, and Ry-anne's cheeks flared red. She leaned into the center of the table. "No mother, it's not all right. But I'll straighten it out. I have to."

"Won't you tell us why you're so troubled about this?" Gamine asked.

"Tell us, honey. We'll be proud of you whatever. You know that."

Ry-anne was just short of screaming. She sighed, very loudly and stood up. The chair toppled back with a clatter. "Oh for Grand's…" Cheeks burning, Ry-anne picked it up, her hip knocking off the knife she had balanced on the plate. "Things are just getting better and better, aren't they?"

She left the whole mess and strode out of the hall. Heads turned as she passed and the mental curiosity was stifling. She yanked at one of the doors and it flew open, banging so hard she thought it would splinter. Pretending that she'd meant to do it—which was hard since she had to shoot one arm out to stop the door bouncing back in her face—Ry-anne stalked out with

her head high.

Outside, tears threatened. She wiped one hand over her face, which still smelled strongly of oranges and forced herself to continue on.

*Ry-anne?* Markooth sounded worried.

*Don't try to talk me out of it! I have to find out whether this is a mistake.*

She felt him sigh. *If you need to do this then I suppose…*

*I really do.*

Ry-anne bustled towards the prayer room. The corridors were mercifully deserted—only a few kids late for breakfast whipped past. The schoolyard bells would start ringing in a few moments and Ry-anne wanted to be out of the way before she was trampled in the subsequent swarm of babbies rushing towards the schoolhouses. Normally she'd be one of them, but not this morn. This morn regular classes ended and Allocation training began.

Well not if she could help it.

The Priestess was waiting, lighting candles on the front desk. She extinguished the taper's fire when Ry-anne entered.

"Holy Priestess," she said, once she was met by that serene smile all Priestesses possessed.

"Ah, I sense that you are troubled with the news of your path, child. Most in your situation would be."

"It's not right, is it?" she asked. "Tell me the Fates have it wrong."

The Priestess' pleasant expression turned to poorly disguised mortification. She struggled to put her smile back on. "The Fates are never mistaken. All have a purpose. All is Destiny, child. No. Your Allocation is not wrong."

Ry-anne glanced down. Her gaze swiveled over the floor as her thoughts worked. "So how must I go about challenging their decision?"

"Oh!" The Priestess looked as if she was about to faint—otherwise a devil stood before her. "Child, you must not speak so in this holy place."

"But…" Ry-anne clutched her forehead and shoved annoying wisps of hair out of the way. "But by Grand this is awful."

The Priestess seemed to whimper. She quickly kissed her fist and pressed it firmly to her bosom. "Child—"

"Oh Grand I'm sorry—Oh! I mean—"

"Perhaps you ought give talking a rest and listen awhile?"

"That's probably a good idea. I apologize, good Priestess. But my thoughts are in turmoil. I just can't seem to—"

"Listen…" A forced smile. "Child."

"Yes, Priestess."

The Priestess offered her a seat on the front pew and then sat beside her. She smelled of lavender soap. "Many paths are hard to follow, and I understand your fear. You don't believe that you will make a success of yours. But you know, you have many Seasons of training ahead of you. Many Seasons to become accustomed to your Allocation. Have Faith in Destiny, young one. For it is not fallible."

Ry-anne tried to take in what the Priestess said and looked up to the hall's mosaic roof. Red, orange and yellow tiles made up the image of The Fire That Will Always Be Tended. She felt a shiver. "But what do I do? I mean, do I have to act differently now?"

"Certain paths command respect, certainly. And it would be wrong to demean them with unfavorable behavior. But I leave that to you."

Ry-anne looked down at her hands. She played with the bitten nails, ripped off a hangnail. They hardly seemed like capable hands. Were they a reflection of her? Would she be capable? Her head swam. "What if people are angry at the Fates' decision? They tried to get my Pairing annulled; what's stopping them from challenging this, too?"

"It is not challengeable," the Priestess said easily. "And the people have Faith in Destiny and their Grand—as should you."

*She's right. Have faith, Ry-anne.*

*Stay out of this. I'm busy.*

Ry-anne exhaled, long and slow. "So what do I do now? I have no idea how to go about training for something like this."

"No. But we do. First you must meet with your mentals trainer."

"Mentals? No Priestess, I can't do those anymore."

"I know your pain, daughter. But your path demands it of you. Believe me, there will be harder challenges to come."

*And this counseling is supposed to make this easier?* Ry-anne asked Markooth.

*I think she's just being honest with you.*

Ry-anne sat up straighter and the bench creaked. "Fine. I'll meet with my teacher, but I'm not saying that I'll be able to do anything straight away."

"Very well. Your trainer awaits you in the Grand Statue Garden. Go now."

"Well at least I get out of history class this morn." The Priestess looked confused as Ry-anne got up to leave. "I would have had to sit through Dimension history this morn had not I been Allocated yester-eve."

"I see." The Priestess edged out of the pew. "Well, you shall not be studying history this morn."

"Thank the Grand. I cannot think of anything duller."

"History is in two morns."

Ry-anne looked at the Priestess. She was deadly serious.

In no hurry, Ry-anne made her way towards the Statue Garden. Someone was already there.

"What are you doing here? I'm meeting somebody in a moment."

"I know. I am your trainer."

Ry-anne gaped.

The grin on Lefus' dark face was supremely wicked.

# FIVE

Tell me this isn't true," Ry-anne said, arms folded. But even as she spoke, her eyes took in the mats on the grass and a sinking feeling weighed down her stomach.

"This isn't true."

"Oh funny." She batted strands of hair out of her eyes, hooked them over her ears. "Just so as you know, I hope you haven't come to collect on your bet. I didn't mention anything to Markooth about you berating me the other eve—though I am sure he was aware of it. So it looks like you owe *me* six donkeys, four and a half cow's testicles, and you'd better leave Grey's heart where it is."

Lefus put his hands on his hips. He was obviously in no mood for joking. "Just get over here so we can start."

"I don't believe this," Ry-anne muttered, reluctantly crossing the distance between them. She wanted to ask Markooth whether he had known, but she doubted it. Besides, he was busy concentrating at work in the North Wing. It would be dangerous to interrupt him.

The sun beamed merrily and Jirrup birds fluttered about on bird business. An unwelcome breeze tugged at Lefus' shoulder length raven hair and her robe—reminding her that it was only just Warm Period and that a chill could still lace the air. She shuddered, unsure whether it was from the cold or Lefus.

He looked at her without interest, eyes traveling up and down. She frowned hard, but he was not frightened off. Nervous, she shifted position and waited for him to return to the present Dimension. His black eyes focused—twin, dark orbs that bore into her own, assessing.

"This morn marks the beginning of a continuous Season of mentals training. You will report here this time every morn. Understood? This aft, you will go to the North Wing to commence your Spell training. I will tell Markooth to expect you, and he will give you further instructions when you arrive. We shall start with the elementary maneuvers. I hear you have not practiced physical mentals for quite a while?"

She fidgeted and was again tempted to grill Markooth about how much he knew about this. "Is that a problem?"

"Why not save your defensiveness for when a real attack comes?"

Ry-anne dry-swallowed. Was that a threat? "I'm not doing this."

Lefus ignored her, dragged one mat off the pile of two and laid it next to the first one. Next he grabbed her arm with pincer-like fingers and forced her to stand in the center. "In the air. Now."

"No."

Lefus sighed. "Fine."

Ry-anne screamed as she was propelled upwards. Lefus' will kept her hovering at the height of his head. She bit her lip painfully, embarrassed about crying out. Without warning, he let go his grip and she plummeted. Her stomach fell away. She reacted—stopped her fall with only grass blades to spare—legs bunched up to her bottom.

"You pig-lover," she breathed.

Lefus wasn't taken aback. *Maybe he doesn't have emotions,* Ry-anne thought. *Maybe his have been crushed under a rock.* She glared at him, but his steady gaze did not flinch.

"Now raise high."

"No."

"Raise high!"

"I can't!"

"I don't care about your story, little girl," he growled through gritted teeth. "Now raise high."

That stung. She licked cracked lips and was just about to attempt it—slowly—when his impatience kicked in. He rocketed her up as high as the House and she squeezed her eyes tight against a tickling tummy. It was hard to be so vulnerable—to have to rely on Lefus to keep her there. Her mind reached out tentatively, thinking about taking hold but not definite.

Lefus let go and her stomach once again plummeted to the ground. "Grand!" she screeched from up high. Eyes frightened as his foreboding figure—and the gardens—rushed closer. Like the crow man. Closer. Kyna—rain—ice—numb—curls flailing—squealing, girlish voice—"Help me, Ry!" Closer. She slammed to a stop with mentals, feet just higher than his broad shoulders.

Lefus nodded. No 'well done.' Just an unaffected nod. "Now roll."

"I think…I think I'm done for this morn," she snapped, catching her breath and starting to lower down. But she was still rusty. She juddered and skipped a distance, catching hold just before the impact of the mat could break her ankles. "Great Glandor."

"Should have tucked your legs back to your buttocks. It gives you more time to stop," Lefus said.

She blurted out a wave of disgust at him but he just kept looking, bored and impervious.

"Raise up again. This time give yourself some distance in case you drop."

Trying to collect her patience, Ry-anne rose up, cautiously and painfully slow, as though she was but five Seasons again. It was embarrassing to be so clumsy in front of him. "There," she said finally, resting and holding at a sufficient height. "Can I go now?" *I feel sick,* she stopped herself from saying.

"Show me a roll."

"But—"

Sighing, Lefus spun her himself. He shouted over Ry-anne's indignant screams. "Show me how you would stop a roll!"

"Just stop it!" Ry-anne cried as she hurtled over and over in a mid-air forward roll. Her plait slapped her forehead with each turn. Her stomach protested. "You'll pay for this I swear—ahh—Lefus stop—"

"You stop it."

"Nngh." The world spun furiously. Who knew which way was up or down at this point. Her neck was stressed. But Lefus just kept on rolling. She reached out. Tried to counter the spin, but was rebuffed by Lefus' will. Tried again and was flung away. "Quit throwing me off!"

"Fact of life; somebody has you in a mental spin and you want out of it. You have to work for it. Show me how you would stop."

Ry-anne groaned. Grass. Sky. Grass. Sky. Sick bubbled up in her throat and she quashed an overwhelming urge to vomit. Anger now. "Dammit!" she cried and wrenched herself out of Lefus' mental grasp and backpedaled frighteningly fast through the air. She sensed something solid behind. A tree? She was going to crash! Grand! Hasty reflexes constructed a cushion and the world was finally still.

Ry-anne opened her eyes and met the sky. Shock. She'd thought she would be upright and facing Lefus, a few hand's drop from the grass. "What the—?"

"You lost your direction," Lefus said and she craned up to see him. Her head sieved as she

figured out her center of gravity and realized she was horizontal, not standing. She dropped with a bump.

"Oof! Ow." Her brain rattled, even though a mat cushioned her fall. Her stomach muscles clenched as she struggled to a sitting position and grabbed her ankles. She slouched.

"Still, that *is* how you ought to get out of a roll. But always be aware of your position, not only of what is around you but where you are placed within it. It is always essential to know your orientation. If you ever have to rip out of a real roll, it would be helpful to know whether you are horizontal or vertical. If you have to spend valuable moments figuring which way is up, then your opponent will most likely win. And that means you're dead, by the by."

Ry-anne laughed without mirth. "Thanks. You know, I was worried about my Allocation before I met with you and now, well, you've just made me feel so comfortable."

"I know your problems, Ry-anne—"

"Good for you," she muttered and then dared a look. He glared, seeming unhappy about being cut off. She looked down, broke a few blades of grass, and he continued.

"Believe me. Of all people I know your past and I know your fears. But as long as I have something to do with it, you will not be beaten in a mental fight. I assure you of that."

Ry-anne gazed at him, confusion raging. His dark eyes burned and made her shiver involuntarily. But there was something else lurking in those eyes. Pain. She leaned her head to one side, studying, thoughtful. Lefus turned his back.

"You can go. That's enough for this morn."

She wanted to know what troubled him, what his big secret was that he was hiding. But his clenched fists hardly invited questions, so she stood up, brushed off the grass and strolled out towards the public stables. There she stroked Metal, a velvet black stallion. The sun cheerfully informed her that it was some time till the bells for lunch. Blasted sun, she thought. Blasted, aquamarine sky. How dare the sky be in such a good mood when she was in such a bad one?

As she leaned over the fence to pat Metal's long nose, she wondered about Lefus. Soon after she and Markooth had first been Paired, she had asked what was wrong with his brother. Markooth hadn't understood, but Ry-anne supposed that children saw things from a different perspective. However, it was true that Lefus did seem to walk around under a permanent shadow and, strangely, seemed to repel light and love and anything good. She'd said this to Markooth, who had tried to reassure her that Lefus was perfectly fine, if a little irritable. But he had mentioned that Lefus did not have a Pair and that was undeniably odd, given that he was about fifteen or sixteen Seasons at that time.

Did Markooth think that Lefus would ever get a Pair? she'd asked. But Markooth wouldn't answer that. He just told her, gently, to leave it well alone and never talk about that. Now, Ry-anne's fingers glided over Metal's soft, furry nose. Sometimes she and Markooth took him out with the aging Grey, but not today. She felt the wet tip of his nose and then patted the side of his head, which was lined with veins and a few moles. The sun had warmed his dark fur considerably.

"And Lefus still doesn't have a Pair now, does he?" she asked Metal, who rested his head atop the faded wooden fence. Metal blinked, long eyelashes showing. Feral brown eyes inspected her, more than half-interested. He snuffed at her hand to check for food and sneezed when he found she had none, pulling his head away from the fence and going back to his favorite past time—cropping the grass.

Even though Metal clearly did not have the answers, it was clear that Lefus was still Pairless. So that meant he was either not getting one or he had already had one. And if he

had had one, that meant she was either dead or lost. That would certainly account for Lefus' bleakness and the bubbling anger that he barely contained beneath his tense exterior. It was sad. But the feeling that she didn't even know the half of it gave her the chills. *Why* was Lefus' Pair dead or lost? Ry-anne ruffled the tuft of black hair between Metal's twitching ears.

"Wish you could tell me, boy," Ry-anne murmured. Suddenly the bells for lunch rang out. She said a reluctant goodbye to Metal before running back to the House, wondering who her spell teacher would be. Not Fatbottom—she would be at work in the schoolrooms this day. It would probably be somebody fat and smelly. Or worse, old.

* * *

The door opened and Devenich came out. "The Grand wants to see you," he said as he came out.

Markooth thought that it was about time he got to see who he worked for. He nodded to Devenich who, as the Grand's personal Guard, demonstrated great trust to wait outside while he was alone with their ruler. Markooth strode in, kissed his fist and touched it to his chest.

"Great Grand," he said. "You honor me."

The old woman's eyes sparked, reminding him that supreme energy flooded that wizened form of hers. "I do, do I?" she seemed amused.

"Yes, my Grand."

"Hm. Well, Devenich will be training you as replacement to my personal guard. He is aware of this."

"Me? But I don't—I don't even have seniority—"

"Hold your tongue!" The eyes drilled into him, then softened once she had achieved the desired effect. "Things do not work on seniority around here. They work off talent. Both Indo, Devenich and the eve Guards believe that you will make a fine personal Guard. Any questions? If you do, now is the time to speak them. Otherwise, well, there is no going back."

Although he was taken aback, one never disagreed with the Grand—not in this sort of situation. "No, my Grand. I have no questions. And I thank you for your consider…"

"Pah." She waved an irritated hand, slicing him into silence. "Do not for one moment believe that I chose you out of preference. I chose you for the desire to live. You will be one of my best."

"Yes, my Grand. I would never presume that—"

"Good. Presumption leads to casualties. Now, Devenich will guide you in this, but starting this eve you will have one night on and one night off as Personal Guard. Understood? Good."

Markooth closed his mouth. He wanted to ask how Devenich felt about being usurped by a conscript brat. But he kept the words to himself. The Grand stared at him. His thoughts rushed—was there something he was supposed to say?

"Ah…"

"Scat!"

"Yes, my Grand." He ducked out of the room, feeling like he needed to catch his breath. Devenich did not look at him—he was too caught up with seeking out and repairing or alerting the Grand to any tears or abnormalities in the Dimension.

"Commander," Markooth began.

"I am perfectly fine with your promotion. The Grand has her reasons and we do not question them. All that concerns me is the Grand's safety and I know you will defend her well.

End of discussion."

But would he do a good job? Markooth worried. Devenich would not give him the reassuring glance and half smile Markooth wanted. Fair enough, the Grand's safety was the utmost concern, but a man had pride. Devenich certainly. Unfortunately, there was nothing Markooth could do about the decision.

Devenich seemed to come back to reality a moment. But he still retained that look common to all Guard's. The look that said *even though I'm talking to you my mind lives elsewhere.* Markooth wondered whether he had it yet. Devenich opened the door with mentals, ready to go back in.

"Go home the end of this shift and do not return until the next eve, where you will personally guard the Grand. You won't get any hassle."

Markooth nodded and Devenich went inside. His fingers touched the hilt of his sword and his mentals rested on the knife in his thigh boot. His thoughts were with the Dimension, sensing it like invisible water. Harder than normal water perhaps, maybe more like ice. And every bit as fragile and breakable. Markooth scoured the immediate vicinity for bubbles or cracks. He smelled Indo's sharp mind when he wandered too far off his patch. He moved back and nearly bumped into Devenich, who seemed to glow like a beacon, his mind like an impenetrable shield over the Grand.

*Ry-anne will be visiting the North Wing shortly. She has spell lessons with you-know-who,* Lefus' mental voice said abruptly.

*Understood. How did she fare today?*

There was a mental shrug and Lefus slipped away, leaving Markooth a little agitated. His brother was such blasted hard work. Sometimes it was a struggle to find any warmth in him at all. He knew why of course, but nevertheless it was still hard to keep making excuses for him

A crack in the Dimension. Markooth's heart splintered with shock. Every little break and breach made him anxious, whereas Devenich and Indo would handle it with efficient calm. Happens a lot, they would say after his first heart attack. You just sort it and there's no problem. Easy to say. Markooth focused on the crack, saw the black leaking through like poison. His will stoppered it. The evil fought back, burning Markooth's brain white hot, riddling it with base ideas. But Markooth smoothed good over the chink and the evil was locked out, the Dimension once again perfect.

There was a mental pat-on-the-back from Indo. Suddenly there came a knock on the door. Markooth flashed on Ry-anne. Nervous stomach. Fast heart. Wide eyes. Messy auburn waves that she'd tried to smoothe out. Cute.

*Oh don't be disgusting,* he chided himself and let Indo know that he would let her through. But Indo was already aware. *No threat*, he reported.

Markooth breathed a sigh of relief. Of course she was no threat. But what if? Could Markooth ever really harm Ry-anne to protect the Grand? It was these questions that worried him. These questions that made him think maybe one day he would be responsible for allowing destruction into this fair land. Still scouring his area of the Dimension, Markooth started down the stairs to let Ry-anne in. Grand she was in for a shock, he thought, but kept that thought to himself.

*What's going on? Why am I here? Am I in trouble?* He felt her worry absently, the questions not particularly directed at him.

He sent reassurance**.** Poor girl, as if she hadn't had enough shocks these past few morns.

# To be continued in the October 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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The chilling cries of the siren fell silent at last, and the feeding frenzy for its remains would quickly clean up the mess.

"Never look at me unless I speak," the man shouted. "How dare any of you think to look upon me. How dare!" His voice carried on by the Portal generators, the message repeating again and again, farther and farther away.

He began up the road-ramp, a surge of pleasure sweeping through him. "The day comes, Lord Echion," he muttered to himself. He hesitated nearly half way up, scanning more of the darkness above for traces of other galaxies. Other smudges did break the darkness in irregular glistens.

"Where have they taken you, Dragon of Night?!" his voice hovered near hysteria. "Where have they taken you! Putrescent, Mestrate Primoids! Echion, Dragon of Night will stand above you all! He will rule the very stars of your weak God!!" then more quietly. "And I shall ruin the fair daughters of Your mighty ones . . ."

The echoing defiance rolled on across the waking world. Distant cries answered. The man smiled. Some of the Imps had risen. He glanced up the ramp-way and saw the bones of two of the sentinel Imps gurgling in dark juices as organs renewed within them.

The sight reminded him of The Treasure, green and radiant—left behind for a time. It had made all this possible—the Imps and sirens, Pullers and Stormers, but most of all the Helotoids.

He continued up the road-ramp. At its head, the magnificent horned, winged edifice waited, its living doors sealed tightly, eager for this day. He glanced up at the skull-shaped crystal lens suspended between the sweeping wingspan. Through it and millions like it, the Portal generators had long ago focused their energies to link the worlds of the Third Empire. This nexus world of Focus Seven had slept since its fall but stirred with a new hunger. The waking skull-lens glistened highlights of Procyxian blue from some inner, invisible source.

The sentinel Imps climbed from their mire and dropped to their knees.

"Lord Lieutenant Korday," one spoke in a voice more like a hyena's than human. "Welcome your return to Focus Seven. We await your pleasure."

"Open the doors ahead and alert the Stormer within. Have him activate the Portal generator. I will arrive at the control balcony shortly."

They scurried ahead in leaps, seeming to jump from place to place in stop-motion stutters. Korday diverted to one of the ramp-way's retaining walls and looked out toward the expansive horizon. From all around the pool-maze membrane, pale sirens leapt and turned, landing downward again without making a splash. Ship-sized Pullers reached up from their circular enclaves, stretching—sniffing space hungrily for prey.

"In time," Korday said, grinning. "In short time there will be much for you to feast on. Much."

Three squadrons of Razor ships screeched across the sky directly overhead. Good. "Do not venture far." He spoke to them. "Stand ready!" The ships arched back toward his Portal generator. They took positions above its skull-lens, hovering in three, slowly preceding pentagonal formations just slightly farther across than the skull-lens and centered directly above it, pointing toward space.

"Yes, perfect, my sons. Wait. Wait for my death. Look at me—tie in. Should I die, come and take vengeance. But I shall not die! Still, prudence . . . prudence."

The great doors opened ahead. Wind rushed from the darkness beyond. Korday turned and hurried inside.

To mere human eyes the darkness would be complete, but Korday smiled. The ornate,

ponderous lamps of the Black Arts radiated their heavy power and dark terror all about the great staging chamber. The inlaid murals of murder and torture filled its vaulting walls. Each scene seethed where he looked, their atrocities animating when Korday's gaze moved across them.

More Imps had arisen and knelt at his passage. He gave them only passing notice as he strode toward the high balcony facing the massive doors that opened to the Portal generator itself. After arriving, he took the silent lift. Some eighty stories above the floor he emerged to face the Stormer. He smiled. This one was a child with long, flaxen hair tied in a pastel ribbon. She bowed deeply.

"Is all as it was left?" he asked, moving to the control panel. The rows of dark metal control stubs engraved with the symbols of the Old Tongue seemed as if they had just barely been wrought. None were depressed, awaiting his entry of coordinates.

"All *is* as it was," her voice was quiet, introspective. "No infidel foot has touched our sacred world."

"And are you hungry to take worlds for your Lord?"

"Take and devour its innocent ones."

"And soon you shall, once Echion returns with his fleets. But I now require discipline, I require unwavering, loyal discipline."

She bowed assent.

He moved his hands across the stubs, depressing them in order. "I am targeting Mhyrn."

She grew pale in the utter darkness.

"Yes, Mhyrn! Mhyrn!!" his voice strained. "I will found our Fourth Empire back were all began, and the Primoids will be able to do nothing. They are so weakened from all their whining rules and bleeding charities that they cannot move against us in time.

"I have come because the prophesied Holy Man and Infidel are now on Mhyrn. They shall not obtain their desires, for I shall subvert the . . . " his voice tightened upon itself for a moment. He struggled, then forced the syllables out. "Z . . . Z . . . Zorl Worshippers . . ."

The girl nearly retched at the sound of the words. She stood shakily, eyes closed. A thin trail of saliva ran down from the corner of her mouth. Korday gently dabbed it, stroking the girl's chin. "I am sorry I said The name. I shall not speak such accursed words again.

"I shall subvert His pallid impotents first. Then it will be too late to block the glory of Procyx from spreading across the stars to free our Master, wherever he is restrained. Long have I waited . . .

"Come forward. I have selected the Portal's destination. See? But do not as yet engage. I need you to fine tune the entry point."

Nodding, the girl deftly adjusted a sphere floating in a chalice of some bloody, whirling liquid. The walls made slight whimpering sounds.

"Let me see the terrain of Mhyrn."

Together they turned to a stretch of translucent skin drawn across a spiked, metal oval measuring perhaps two meters across. It shuddered, then began to glow. Its venous pink light shifted and stuttered as long streaks of black spread then bled from its arteries until the entire screen wore the color. Shades of white and pink oozed into the black, running into shapes that resolved and articulated.

The limb of the planet appeared, nearly eclipsing the rose-colored sun of Mhyrn. The girl worked at the sphere, sloshing the bloody fluid about as she twisted and turned it. The planet approached.

"There," Korday pointed. "The Outer City. See the great cone edifice? I will not speak it's

name! Set up the entry point a thousand meters up and a thousand meters back, pointing at a tangent to it."

The image shifted, moving past rows of hovering, Mhyrnian battleships that had set up several rings of defensive perimeter about the great cone temple.

"That is so, yes. Now, again I say do *not* activate the Portal until I call or until you sense my death. I shall not die, but prudence . . . prudence."

Finished, the girl fell to her knees, bowing. "What more can I do? Have you any notion of where the Dragon of Night or the Lady Ramm are?"

Korday's anger roiled from within. "Great Echion is yet hidden away by the Primoids. I can do nothing to sense him, but unchecked, Procyx shall free him. He readies for his escape even now." Korday did not believe these last words, but it was imperative the devout *did*.

"As for Ramm, she and her minions dwell trapped beyond the edge of the universe lost, I fear, behind the time curtain that hangs there."

"I am of her order," the Stormer bowed low. "We MUST free her!" Her wailing screech rivaled the deafening pierce of metal dragged against metal. It rattled the staging hall, reechoing down deep burrows and lower chambers, evoking sympathetic cries from Imps and other lesser slaves brooding below. "Vengeance *shall* be mine upon the worlds of the Primoids!" She tore at her sleeves, rending them. The dull metal nodes on her arms crackled sparks in blue like Procyx's fire. She pounded her fists on the floor with such force that its thick metal buckled. Fiercer forks of power spat from her arm nodes about the room singeing smoldering, black smears all across the broad weave cloth of her tunic. Her tortured wailing framed no words, and the fierce, blue eruptions danced across the walls oozing metal in hot white spatters wherever they touched. Korday watched, somber.

He raised his hand for silence. "Focus . . . focus. You must be focused now. Look at me. Look! Yes. Restrain your fury. Soon. Now you must guard the skies of Mhyrn. Watch for the foundation of the Empire and then you *shall* have your revenge!"

He looked up, teeth gritted, eyes wide and unblinking. "And I vow this oath of revenge by the Great God of the Mhyrnians! Witness You, and *all* Your mighty ones! Do You hear? I make the sacred signs . . . I speak *Your* ancient words of power, that You cannot mistake! Fon Koshk! Fon Vorkaz! Tus nu Noiv! Tu Fon Dillistoov, Kellk von skeshk Re Vee Nogk! Do You see?!" He touched the heel of his hand at his forehead. Smoke wafted from it. "I, Prince of the Order of those Watchers and Giants murdered in Your flood, burn this oath upon my forehead so that I cannot forget! Its fiery words shall sear my sleep and never be extinguished until every world is claimed and every holy Treasure is ours! This oath I seal also upon the foreheads of all who wait here on this sacred world."

The shouted words fell away in dwindling, rebounding echoes until only the quiet thrumming of the Portal command station remained. Korday gathered himself. He turned to see the Stormer, her own forehead wafting thin trails of smoke.

"Now, I need awaken one of the elite of the Helotoids."

"Come Lord Lieutenant." Her face set with steeled resolve, the girl turned and hurried toward the lift.

Together they moved down one of the thousands of long, subterranean troop tunnels that ran and twisted between Portal generators. Korday strolled past the endless rows of standing sarcophagi, glancing at the name and lists of theaters in which their sleeping occupants had fought. He could barely see the actual Helotoids, their forms murky within the suspension membrane that filled each coffin.

"No, not this one," he muttered over and over while the Stormer flitted about ahead of him, glancing and occasionally indicating a possibility. No . . . No . . . No . . . Wait."

He stopped, surveying a lengthy and very old list of campaigns. Some etchings were so ancient Korday had trouble discerning them. This one went back all the way to the first days of Tolereth. Above the head of the sarcophagus Korday found a crest as old as the universe itself. "Andralia," He muttered. A moment's more study stirred recognition. It dawned upon Korday with a flood of excitement. This Helotoid was one of the original five engineered by Echion himself. Korday glanced at the name: Delt. He smiled. Yes. The name opened recollections. Delt *had* been made on Tolereth and would already know much of Mhyrn."

"This one," he said.

The Stormer turned and her face went pale. "That one is unstable. We keep him out of honor and by the command of the scriptures handed us from the Dragon of Night Himself."

Korday regarded the dark shape beneath the membrane and thought back, concentrating hard on the days of the Dawn Era. He closed his eyes, allowing his memory to bore down past billions of years to the beginning—the glorious days when they had taken the Treasure. Yes, he did remember Delt. The Helotoid had murdered hundreds of divisions of his own imperial soldiers to ferret out one Primoid agent. He had then tortured him into revealing what the Primoids knew of those energies that led to development of the Portals. Delt had taken initiative, rebelled against conformity. It was wholly unlike the fanatically obedient though too often unimaginative Helotoids. But Delt's initiative had made possible the great Portal arrays that had spawned the Empires of Echion. Delt *would* be the right one for this work. Korday smiled and stubbed the controls to terminate suspension.

The membrane sloughed off the Helotoid as if made of tumbling, transparent maggots. From behind the sleeping warrior, the pendulous organ of preservation slowly began to shudder in swallowing waves. Korday gazed at the eyes of the Helotoid, waiting for their dark glow to blister beneath the thick brows of a dragon's face—a face Korday felt sure would give pause to a T-Rex. The eyes stayed dead but the jaw moved and yawned. It looked hardened pink around the edges, the face itself a marriage of metal, muscle, bone and mucous. It's dark sensor hairs, pulled back behind the venous, boned face, trailed long behind the neck in a kind of ponytail. The weapons array clustered at the sternum of the jade, suede-covered bone armor glowed to orange life. Ripples of red infused the feeder tendons that stretched along neck and abdomen and limbs, blinking in throbbing waves of angry light before settling to a constant, dull glow. The left hand-claw twitched. Several tentacles crept out of the Helotoid's back, exploring the air, testing its surroundings before pulling back in. Delt's eyes flashed. "Lieutenant Korday," its rumbling, lion-rough voice spoke at last.

Korday smiled. "Awake, old friend. Gather your powers. We have work to do on Mhyrn."

Lord Lieutenant Korday stood at the crest of the ramp-way just beyond the doors to the Portal generator structure. A single needle of coherent blue stabbed up through the skull lens higher and farther until it was lost in intergalactic blackness. The fifteen razor ships clung to the column, waiting—stretched out in a helical formation. The Portal stood ready to open upon Mhyrn.

Korday waved his hand at the base of the road-ramp. A swirl of Procyx-blue flames spawned again its rippling vertical vortex--the core unwinding like a dilating iris. Mhyrn waited beyond. Korday turned to look behind him.

Delt stood a few steps to the side, his reptilian head searching about atop its arching neck.

The world was awake! The minions a billion strong gathered at Korday's feet, kneeling—averting their eyes.

"Subtlety," he called to them. "For now, subtlety must govern until Procyx has freed Echion, Great Dragon of Night. He shall then gather the Billion fleets *before* the due days of the Warriors of Light and WE shall take the galaxy of the Primoids and all that lies beyond! The Fourth Empire will be the grandest of all!

"But for now, patience . . . prudence. We spawn by deceit, grow by subversion. We mislead while the Empire is yet tender. None but what I summon must come through until the Dragon of Night Himself shall call you.

"*Then* will come the Day of our great power. We shall rule from the heart of Polyphemus to the edges of the universe and none will *dare* to stop us." Korday lifted his fist. "WE SHALL REIGN IN BLOOD AND HORROR! Blood and horror! Blood and horror! Blood and horror!"

The chant took up and spread until the air roared with it. Korday surveyed the gathered masses, stretching off into misted remoteness. The great ship-sized Pullers stretched and flailed hundreds of kilometers into the pitch skies, ravenous.

"Soon," he muttered again, "But prudence . . . prudence."

He and the Helotoid Delt stepped through the wavering vortex and were gone.

* * *

The small robot 361 waited in the darkness of the vaulting staging hall, anxious to be gone. It watched the Stormer return to her vigilance, gazing at Mhyrn through the stretched skin-screen, her hand poised above the control orb in the bloody chalice. She waited, utterly motionless.

All was still.

361 hovered in silence at the ceiling. Here it had waited, an unwilling but obedient, *invisible* part of the dark world for more years than human history could recall.

Now it must go.

It took hours of micro adjustments to cross the several meters it needed to reach the corner and begin its carefully planned escape routine. Once there at the corner it smeared itself from the edges of the gritty membrane of a slumbering Helotoid and waited longer. It must not move visibly too soon.

Hours passed. All grew still. The Stormer had not moved. The robot decided it was time. It shut down all its power save a trickle in one tiny area of its mind then let itself drop from the corner.

This was its most dangerous moment.

The Imp hurried over to regard the metallic and plastic wet thing that had fallen from the wall. It picked it up and studied the thing with uncomprehending eyes. It was nothing, a mere hunk of rings and struts and globes. Here was something like a spine, but it was nothing shaped like a human--nothing to defend against, unless . . .. The Imp almost turned to the Stormer for guidance then remembered the fate of the last Imp to disturb her after the great Lord Lieutenant had ordered her to watch the screen with unwavering vigilance.

What *was* this thing? The Imp looked up at the wall, trying to discern from where it

had fallen. It could not imagine and grew tired of the effort. It carried it over and dumped the mystery junk into a waste shaft, watching it clatter down the curving chute.

The garbage scow lifted from Focus Seven, falling up toward a satellite quantum singularity orbiting well beyond safe distance from the nexus world. The scow passed the unfinished fleet of intergalactic ring-ships—massive, mobile Portal generators with gate openings large enough to pass entire flotillas of battle cruisers. From inside the scow, the nearly dead 361 did not see these.

The scow opened its bay doors and let drift its mixed load of waste and trash accumulated and worn out over a living planet's aeon's long sleep. The nearest junk twitched and began spiraling in toward the tiny event horizon, glowing red, stretching then winking beyond the event horizon in dark sparks heavy with x-rays. The scow pulled away.

It would be a while before the next one arrived.

Finally alone, 361 powered up and began a slow tumble at a plausible tangent away from the singularity. Albeit it was a powered escape, the tumble should seem a random event to any casual observer, and the robot hoped no one would think much of it.

Hours passed into days. The subtle escape continued without incident. Far away now, the robot turned to regard the dark planet. From this distance, it seemed to roil with the dark life of some world-sized paramecium.

The robot checked its scanners. Nothing was scanning it. Good. 361 powered fully, warming its P-Q-I drive pod. It made its calculations carefully then rechecked them--a rare thing for a robot--but it needed to be sure. The Primoids must know. The small robot readied itself, searched the heavens for a tiny smudge of a star swarm far removed from the dusty lens of Procyx's galaxy, then made its first jump to hyperspace.

# Chapter One
# Into the Eye

## I

Goren the Terrible dragged his huge arm across his wet forehead, not bothering to wipe the perspiration he picked up from it anywhere, and he sat forward, puffing under the effort. "It is impossible that you cannot reach them. Jzherillza was with them! You should have been able to reach her on deep tranz frequencies!"

"We have tried, sir. There is no response. Her life monitor reads nothing. I fear we must assume that Jzherillza is dead."

"Now wait a minute! Didn't you report to me that Kaskel had found Merin's ship at the rendezvous point on Mhyrn? That he and Jzherillza had actually captured the Most High Nobleman?"

"Great and Terrible One—their report stated only that they were about to capture a Most High Nobleman—*about* to capture—sir."

"Hmm." Goren grunted, pausing from his tirade long enough to catch his breath, which took him a full minute. He brooded in silence for a moment while battling dizziness. He watched the two officers who were to oversee the task of bringing him the Mhyrnian Nobleman. They stood nervously, waiting for him to speak again. At last, Goren took several deep breaths and spoke. "Now elaborate on this other matter—this supposition, as you called it. Speak truly! At the same time you are told by Kaskel that they are about to capture the Most High Nobleman, you say you have also received reports that our ships at Mhyrn were being destroyed? And that, by some strange, Mhyrnian power?"

The younger of the two officers swallowed visibly.

"Mhyrnian power? They are our allies against the Federationists!" his voice echoed in the hall. Then he spoke very softly. "Now I want a clear report. What is the exact status of Kaskel's sortie to Mhyrn? Take care! I want answers, not excuses!"

"Great one," the higher officer stepped forward, bowing his head. "We make no excuses. The last transmissions we received from General Kaskel's fleet were garbled and confused. We heard terrified accounts—something about strange golden energies destroying all our ships there before all communications ended abruptly. We checked with Dualor before making our report to you. He responded that it might have been the legendary Mhyrnian *Golden Death* that destroyed our fleet.

"The Golden Death?"

"Yes, Great One. Apparently some mystical power the Most High Noblemen are supposed to possess. Since that abrupt break in communications, all our attempts to raise General Kaskel or the fleet at Mhyrn have failed. Accordingly, we have sent two LIAR fighters out to investigate."

Goren sat back. The thirty or so shielding devices he always wore about his enormous frame always clinked when he moved. He tranzed his throne to raise, turn and drift toward the wide view-port of his enormous flagship.

Procyx shone in upon him. It was the size of a grapefruit, held at arm's length, and was

surrounded by spectacular, filamentary, coherent blue energies that perpetually spewed forth from it. They were breathtaking to behold and Goren never ceased to wonder at them.

A patrol of thirty of his crack KRAS fighters soared past the flagship. Goren's pride swelled anew. No Federation ship had or ever could come this near to Procyx and survived. Since Goren had found the secret of what Procyx was, his entire flotilla of nearly one hundred thousand ships could, because of numerous successful raiding sorties on worlds doomed to Hypermotility, rest easily here at the outskirts of the deadly star in perfect safety. None of the other combines could boast Goren's success rate. He had even absorbed several of them without a battle. None could stand against him. None! He turned to his officers again.

"Report to me the moment you have discovered the fate of Kaskel's fleet."

The officers bowed and left. Goren stubbed one of the hundred buttons adorning his throne, disappeared in a green brilliance and emerged instantaneously within Dualor's quarters. He could not help smiling with satisfaction each time he used this transference device. He knew of no one else who had ever obtained one of these—the Federation's most secret transportation technology.

Dualor, the Mhyrnian, huddled at a table, a comp scanner reading and rereading near paper-thin plates of pluridium with ancient inscriptions engraved upon them. Dualor was the most skilled among the Mhyrnian judges—the keepers of the ancient records. It was from him that he had learned of the ancient, secret technologies that were supposed to be hidden upon Mhyrn itself—technologies so incredible and irresistible that even the Federation City of RoseStar had fallen before them. Using those powers, Goren planned to begin his serious conquest of the Galaxy. The desire to see Federation ships exploding and fleeing before his Mhyrnian-enhanced warships thrilled his body with the force of lusting.

"What is this I hear about some power called the Golden Death?" Goren said evenly.

When Dualor looked up, his face was pale—even ashen. "Great One! You startled me." He rose to bow, but Goren stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"This Golden Death . . . is this the power that was used against RoseStar?"

Dualor bowed his head. "I am not sure, now. There is some confusion in the writings. On Mhyrn are said to be ancient artifacts of pluridium reportedly holding the very essence of power over Procyx, and that the Most High Noblemen supposedly have these artifacts in their possession. In the matter of RoseStar . . . I had assumed that those artifacts had been used against the city . . . and yet . . . "

Goren shifted in his

throne, his breaths coming in quiet wheezing. He cleared his throat. "The Most High Nobleman that Merin located and brought to Mhyrn had been living on Ahrgol. Kreskel's fleet seems to have been attacked by some strange golden energy. Are you saying that the Most High Noblemen may have utilized these artifacts there? Is it possible that the Most High Nobleman Merin found has had possession of these artifacts on Ahrgol all this time? If so, why didn't he report that to us?

Dualor shook his head, perplexed.

"If the Most High Nobleman does have the power of the Golden Death, why would he fight us—we who are also enemies of the Federation? I do not understand that." Goren wiped the perspiration from his forehead again. "Perhaps he does not understand our desire to fully avenge your people against the Federation."

"Perhaps," Dualor said.

"All right. Let us assume that the Most High Nobleman has possession of the artifacts . . ."

Dualor shook his head. "For our sakes I pray that he does not—not yet."

"Why?"

"We have no power that can stand against the Golden Death. No one does. If the Golden Death is being used through the sacred artifacts, it has the power to destroy Procyx itself. Should he choose to turn those powers against us . . ."

Goren thought back to moments earlier when he had gazed at Procyx from his throne room. "Would the Most High Nobleman use these artifacts against Procyx the moment he received them?"

"I believe he would, Great One. It is his fate in this life, and he would want to end the destructions of Procyx, as the prophecies demand."

Goren smiled suddenly. "Look, then! It is obvious! Don't you see? The Most High Nobleman does not yet have the artifacts."

Dualor frowned. "How do you know this, Great One?"

"Procyx yet shines."

"Ah, yes, I see, Great One. It would seem that, as you say, he does not yet have the artifacts. But if he is truly a Most High Nobleman, he most likely knows where the artifacts are being kept today. When he obtains them, it will only be a matter of time before he uses them."

"Do you know where they are kept?"

Dualor shook his head. "Until the days of Ambylor the Martyr, none of us Judges knew. When Ambylor sought them at the great shrine, they were gone—apparently removed by one of the Most High Noblemen of those times and hidden elsewhere. The Judges have secretly sought that information for centuries now. None of the Most High Noblemen have revealed it—even under torture."

"All right! All right! I don't like all these 'ifs' and 'what ifs!' Let us assume that he does not yet have the artifacts but that he does command a degree of the Golden Death. Agreed?"

Dualor nodded once.

"So tell me this. What power is there that can not only stand against the Golden Death, but overpower it?"

"I told you, Great One . . ."

"You said that the Golden Death, when used through the sacred artifacts, is irresistible. If it is *not* used through the sacred artifacts, is it still irresistible?"

"I cannot say. I must assume, since the artifacts are needed to make the Golden Death irresistible, that without them there *are* limits to its power."

"Yes. Yes! I concur. Now, from the legends, tell me of Echion's powers. Might we not call upon them to overcome the Golden Death?"

Dualor stood abruptly, knocking several sheets of inscribed pluridium off the table in the motion. "We must not tamper with the powers of Echion!"

"But Jzherillza has used the Black Arts to win us many victories! Now, unfortunately, there is a better than good chance that she has failed against the Golden Death, for it appears that she has been destroyed along with a hundred of my best vessels and thousands of my best troops. If we are to subdue the Most High Nobleman before he can obtain the artifacts, we must utilize a greater degree of power from the Black Arts. Is that not so?"

"It would seem so. But I would recommend other methods."

"And why is that?"

"The ancient records speak of a balance—an equilibrium between the Arts of Light and the Black Arts. The danger to us resides in the possibility of greater power from the Arts of Light being used against us if we increase our usage of the Black Arts."

Goren frowned.

"Great One—let me put it this way. If one is raised to a higher level, then the other is freed to match it."

Goren thought on this for a time, then said. "But has not the Golden Death just now appeared? Are we not, now, free to match it?"

Now Dualor paused, looking down. After a time, he looked again upon Goren the Terrible. "It may be that Jzherillza's mastery of the Federationist tranzing powers through the Black Arts that has brought us such wealth—it may be that the usage of those Black Arts is what has allowed the appearance of the Golden Death!"

"Or it may be that the appearance of the Golden Death will allow us to reach even higher levels of power beneath the Black Arts—is that not also possible?"

Dualor hesitated.

"You have told me that there are deep and ancient secrets," Goren whispered hungrily. "I remember! You have told me of a great armada, invincible beneath the power of the Black Arts, hidden within Procyx itself. The Billion Fleets, they are called. I would that you tell me more of the Billion Fleets."

Dualor turned away, his dark robes making him seem to almost disappear in the gloom of the study. His white hair made it seem as if his head were floating in the darkness.

"Speak!" Goren shouted. "It is my command!"

"Great One . . ."

"Tell me!!" His voice screeched with such vibrancy that the very walls rang with the reverberations.

Dualor had not seen Goren's swollen hand poised over one of the controls of his console, nor did Dualor suspect that the impressive, fearful dread that threatened to paralyze him might be artificial. Instead, the Mhyrnian fell to his knees.

"Mercy!" his voice shook with terror. "Do not destroy me!"

Goren took a deep breath, shifted his hand across the console and spoke softly. "Tell me what I wish to know." He watched with satisfaction as Dualor clutched at his chest, his eyes shut tight. After a very few moments, he nodded quickly.

"In the ancient days—the Era of the Great Dawn—Echion ruled half this galaxy. He did so with ease, for the government of every world within his greatest empire, the Third Empire, was fiercely loyal to him. This was because of the Black Arts."

"Where did he learn these arts?" Goren asked, sitting forward.

"He did not learn them for he was the author of them. Some stories say that he fell from a great, high heaven down into ours. Others say that he arose from a hell where he had tampered with the very forces of life, creating great and terrible creatures that obeyed him without thought.

"In those days, the Brotherhood of Light stood between him and total domination of the galaxy—the Brotherhood of Light with its own Arts and powers—among them the Golden Death.

"Using all the power of half the galaxy, and for a thousand years, Echion built himself a great armada of ships. He personally endowed each of these vessels with a full measure of the Black Arts. He also raised up terrible, invincible warriors—creatures that were a blending of human, fierce predator and machine. Upon these he also bestowed incredible power—power to survive, regenerate—beings with unshakable courage and loyalty to him—each cloaked in an invisible armor of sorcery that could kill an opponent by fear alone. A single warrior was said to have been capable of conquering and then ruling even the most advanced technological cultures—a continent at a time, inhabited by hundreds of millions of people."

Goren felt a gnawing churn of excitement within him, making him squirm around a bit in his throne.

"Each of Echion's magnificent warships and fighters was controlled by one or more of these eugenic cyborgs—these Invincibles. His armies were made of them—a hundred thousand strong in each fleet—and there were a billion such fleets. And within the fleets were war machines and vessels—thousands of fighters of incredible power—Razor ships, they were called. All in all, each fleet of the billion fleets consisted of a hundred massive warships, and each of them was outfitted with a hundred Razor ships. Besides that, each of the Billion Fleets boasted a hundred thousand troops."

"What happened to them?" Goren said, his throat dry from excitement.

"As Echion was preparing to move against the Brotherhood of Light, the Primoids—beings of light and power equally great to Echion—overcame him in a single night. He was cast away into some distant heaven . . ."

"And the Billion Fleets?"

"They were imprisoned in the in-between place—the limbo that serves as a buffer between all the myriad universes that exist—perhaps what is now called hyperspace—what you have identified as the true nature of the Eye of the Procyx."

"Who imprisoned the fleets? The Primoids?"

"No. It was Echion who placed the billion fleets there. Legend has it that in the very act of being cast away he hid the fleets between universes. He put them to sleep and vowed, at last, to return, wake the Billion Fleets and call them from their hiding place. He swore a revenge oath by the Creator that he, too, would sweep across the galaxy in a single night, destroying both the Brotherhood of Light and the Primoids. Echion has not been heard of since."

"Now let me see. Your legends say that Procyx is the Eye of Echion, do they not?"

"Procyx is ascribed to Echion only in the times of Grief—the days we live in now, for example. In such days the Eye of Echion is also called the Light of Echion. In Mhyrnese, *Eye* also means light, or power."

"So only in these days does the Eye of the Procyx mean the Eye of Echion. Yes?"

"Yes. These are days of Grief for the galaxy."

"Then what does Procyx mean? It is also called the Eye of the Procyx—yes?"

"The word Procyx has many definitions, the exact meaning depending upon the context

of its use. Some of the meanings of Procyx are Heaven, Hell, Power, Light, the Black Dragon, Weakness, the Great Doorway, the Creator, Prison, Blindness, All sight, Birth, Death . . ."

Goren cut him off with a wave of his hand. "So you say the Billion Fleets reside within Procyx—now—at this moment? Actually inside it?"

"That is the legend. They sleep within the Eye, waiting for Echion to call them forth to conquer the galaxy."

Goren plunged his squat fingers through his long, coarse hair. It could well be! It *must* be that this legend was true! Procyx was an inter-dimensional rift that passed through hyperspace. The Golden Death had undoubtedly destroyed his best crews and vessels back on Mhyrn—so *it* existed, and Goren knew of the reality of the Black Arts. So if the Golden Death existed, why not the Billion Fleets?

"What did Echion look like?" Goren asked after nearly a full minute of brooding.

"I do not know his true appearance," Dualor looked weak, drained and pale as he answered. "His title is the Dragon of Night. This much is known: He was a polymorph—a shape changer. Oh, yes! A man yes, but capable of disguising himself perfectly—assuming any shape he chose for any purpose."

Goren thought for a moment. "Then he might appear to his troops in any form he chose?"

"He would certainly be able to do so. But I would assume that he probably would have chosen a specific, singular appearance for them alone—one that could not be imitated—even by another possessing great spells beneath the Black Arts. With such powers to be commanded, I can imagine he would be constantly on guard against treachery, even from within his own ranks."

This Goren understood only too well. The reason for his own throne, his personal Guard made up of five thousand soldiers and the myriad ornaments he always wore, was to provide him invincible protection. It had saved him from many attempted coups, mutinies and even wars. Now, he felt sure these devices could serve him to the utmost in the endeavor he now considered.

"Is there anything more I should know from the legends about the Billion Fleets?"

Dualor swallowed. Goren saw a tiny jewel on the arm of his throne illuminate. He barely resisted a smile, waiting for Dualor to speak.

"There is nothing more," the Mhyrnian said, looking away.

"You are lying, but I perceive it is from fear. Fear of what?"

Dualor fell into his chair like a sack of beans. He shook his head slowly.

"You need not fear me," Goren said softly. The jewel was still lit.

"I do not fear *you*," Dualor said, looking up—his face resolved. Normally, such an answer would have infuriated Goren. Now, he only waited, watching the jewel. It did not darken.

"What do you fear, if not me?"

"The Two—the Warriors of Light who are prophesied to come. *They* shall be given power to overthrow Echion himself. If you should do what you are considering, it may bring them here, and then all who follow the Black Arts need fear and tremble."

The light in the jewel went out. Goren suffered a flood of dread at Dualor's words. He had never heard of the Warriors of Light. He took a deep breath and, controlling his voice, spoke.

"When are they said to come," his hands moved shakily across three controls of his console. " . . . These Warriors of Light?"

Dualor shook his head. "In the dark days of Echion's escape—days of war, horror and bloodshed on a galactic scale. The Warriors shall come from the far heavens and even all the powers of the Black Arts shall not be able to stop them.

So say the prophecies."

"Not before?" Goren said. "Only when Echion is freed?"

"That is the prophecy."

Goren smiled, transferring himself out of Dualor's study.

Dualor now turned his eyes to the sacred records before him. "Only when Echion is freed—or, perhaps, one posing as Echion? One able to stir the Billion Fleets—to sweep across the galaxy in a single night?"

Goren emerged in the audience room where he had interrogated his two officers on Kaskel's sortie. His frame quivered beneath the excitement. Procyx shone in upon him. As he regarded it, it was as though he could *feel* the presence of the Billion Fleets within—sleeping—waiting.

"I am not Echion," Goren said, satisfied. "The Warriors will not come. That is not the prophecy. But I *shall* wake the billion fleets—and we shall sweep across the galaxy in a single night!!"

* * *

"We're ready, Great One," a woman said, bowing to Goren. To see him out of his throne was so rare an event that everyone around him had trouble not staring. He held a remote in his left hand that would transfer him to the immediate safety of his throne at his slightest whim. Guards stood three deep at the door, their depolarizers buzzing at full power.

Taelkawn, his chief of staff, spoke quietly into Goren's ear. "Hers were the only remains that could be recognized—and that is because her body had been placed in a stasis ark for return here."

Goren turned to him. "You mean she did not die in battle?"

"She was apparently dead before the battle began. Even so, her death was violent and unlike anything we have ever seen. I must assume that one of the reasons Kaskel put her in stasis was so that we might study the phenomenon here—perhaps understand it."

"And you are sure? Kaskel, himself, is dead?"

"The entire fleet is gone. The wreckage of our ships could be seen everywhere across a great valley next to an enormous mountain the Mhyrnians call Markeeome . . ."

"Spare me the details. Did no one survive?"

"No one, sir. I am sorry." Taelkawn backed slowly away into the shadows. The room was dimly lit. Laid across the body was a dark, iridescent flag with a jeweled dragon in black upon a glistening crimson shield. Goren swallowed hard, pulling the flag back to expose the head of the body beneath it.

He barely recognized Jzherillza. Her normally puffy, full face seemed incredibly gaunt. Its blistered skin stretched across her skull like an elastic mask. It looked like brittle rice paper. It was as if every molecule of water had been suddenly, violently drawn out of her. Where her eyes should be there were sunken charred maws that seemed to go back forever into darkness. Goren felt a flush of horror and anger surge through his enormous frame.

The shape of her head didn't seem right. He reached out to move her matted, scorched hair aside. The feel of her cold skin was like sun-cracked, powdered leather. When her hair was pushed aside, Goren saw that the skull was collapsed inward. But it did not look crushed, as from an impact. It looked more like melted plastic. He pulled her hair forward again and, removing the flag farther down, took the amulet she wore around her neck. A moment later he

replaced the flag over the body.

"I shall see you avenged," Goren said, transferring himself back to the safety of his throne. "I shall personally destroy the man who did this to you!" His hands moved across the consoles of the throne. His voice rose to a terrible rumbling and all in the room cowered before him. "Do you hear me, God and all you Primoids and Mestrates?! I will throw you down and rule in the Heavens above you, and you shall burn forever and never be consumed!!" Goren stubbed one of the jewels on his throne and all in the room fell to unconsciousness except him.

He shook with excitement, holding the amulet before his bloated face and then, his eyes burning, he raised it above his head.

"Korday!" he called. "Master of the Black Arts from the Far Heavens—I call you here! I submit myself and all my people to you that I may wield your power and destroy all that you hate and rule this galaxy, keeping it safe for the return of our common Master, Echion the Dark. Come to me, I beseech you in the name of the Dragon of Night!!"

Silence. Nothing.

"Ramm!" he tried again. "Great Queen of Power—come unto me this hour and I will fulfill any desire within my power to grant! Come and endow me with all things that I may avenge the death of this, your daughter-servant Jzherillza!"

Still nothing. Goren took a deep breath and put the amulet back on himself, waiting.

Nothing. Near the door, someone stirred. Goren touched the control that would blanket the room with a fresh dose of "J" rays and all fell silent again.

An hour later, Goren cursed loudly and transferred himself into Jzherillza's quarters.

He hardly expected to find Dualor there. Hundreds of ancient, inscribed metal plates and old, old manuscripts lay stacked hurriedly in the center of the room. The heavy Mhyrnian stood over them holding a buzzing depolarizer. The moment he saw Goren, he put the weapon down, shutting it off.

"What are you doing?" Goren said after a moment.

Dualor shook his head. "I . . . I was guarding the records, Great One. Now that you are here," He started toward the door. "There is no need . . ."

"Wait."

Dualor stopped, hesitated a moment, then turned to face Goren.

"From whom were you guarding it?"

"These are priceless . . ."

"From *me*, perhaps?" Goren's hands moved across his consoles, resting casually above a row of buttons.

"For you, Great One—FOR you!"

"It is well that I came when I did."

Dualor stood uneasily, unnaturally still—trying to appear calm.

"Now tell me, Mhyrnian. Can you read these?"

Dualor regarded the pile for a moment, then bowed his head. "I fear I cannot."

"You are one of the Judges," Goren's middle finger poised above a single button. It was adorned with two rings of star sapphires set in pluridium. Goren took a deep breath and continued, the slightest wheeze accompanying each word. "I know you are among the greatest scholars of Mhyrn—and you say you cannot read these? Try, please."

Dualor nervously obeyed, picking up a thin plate of pluridium inscribed with symbols and pictures. Goren allowed him several minutes of study before speaking again. "Well?"

"Some of the symbols I know. Others I do not. The Black Arts are far older than Mhyrn. I

do not think . . ."

Goren wasn't listening. At least, he wasn't watching, for his eyes, now accustomed to the dimness of Jzherillza's quarters, saw that the room was lined with shelves. Many of them held metal plates and scrolls like those piled in the center of the room.

" . . . That I wouldn't know where to start." Dualor's words brought Goren's attention back to the pile and the Mhyrnian.

"If that is so, then how did you know?" Goren asked, evenly.

"Know? Know what, Great One?"

"How did you know which records you wanted to destroy and which not, unless . . ." his beefy middle finger came down upon the button. " . . . Unless you *can* read them."

Dualor collapsed to his knees in a gurgling moan, his hands clutching his ears. Goren let the Mhyrnian consider the remark for a full minute before releasing him. The moment he lifted his finger, Dualor fell to the floor, sobbing.

"Now listen to me, you great, fat barbarian! I know you were trying to destroy the records. I am no fool! I was prepared to let you live, but now I am not so sure. Mhyrnian Judges are as common as strumpets—and just as easily bought. I will yet give you one last chance. If I sense treachery, your death will not be so pleasant as what you have just felt!"

Dualor looked up at Goren. His eyes had dark bruises beneath them and were already beginning to swell.

"I want you to tell me everything you can about Echion," Goren leaned forward. "I want to know what he looked like to his troops; what he wore and even how often he brushed his teeth, if you can discover that! And I want to know how I can summon up all the powers Jzherillza used and more. I assume that that information is what you were trying to destroy—is it not?"

Dualor only nodded yes.

Goren sat back, studying the Mhyrnian curiously.

"Why, Dualor? I have treated you well—given you everything you ever asked of me. Have we not, together, repaid the injustice of the Federation against the people of your world? Have I not supplied your people with weapons and ships with which they can fight Federation Imperialism? Speak!"

"It is so," Dualor gurgled, his voice thick as though stricken with a disease.

"Then why?" Now Goren's voice was as gentle as a child's and equally as full of innocent hurt. "Of all my staff, I would have suspected you least. Why?"

Dualor took several deep breaths. He would not look at Goren. "Without the Golden Death, Procyx will destroy *all* worlds—everything. I feared lest the intervention of the Black Arts should prevent salvation for the universe."

"But we have prospered beneath Procyx," Goren spread his thick arms and a sweeping gesture. "We are safe from its powers. It is the Eye of Echion. Don't you see? If we should align ourselves to him, would we not prosper further? How could the very power that fuels Procyx—the Black Arts—how could they destroy those who direct them?"

"The Black Arts do not fuel Procyx."

"But Procyx is the Eye of Echion—the Power of Echion! You said . . ."

"It is the called the Light of Echion—the place where the Power of Echion waits and sleeps—the Billion Fleets. The Golden Death alone has power over Procyx—only the Golden Death. If we destroy its agents, the Holy One who will command it, then we eventually destroy ourselves."

Goren sat back, suddenly uneasy. "Is there only one who can destroy Procyx using the

artifacts?"

"It is said that a Holy Man and an Infidel shall destroy Procyx through the sacred artifacts by the power of the Golden Death. That is all we know for sure."

"Cannot *any* sorcerer of sufficient skill command Procyx into destruction using the artifacts? Are not the powers of the Black Arts greater than any power in the universe?"

"The legends say only the Golden Death . . ."

"Yes, yes—I know!" Goren held up his hand. "Then it appears that we shall have to conquer this Holy Man and hold him captive until we need him. Surely *that* can be accomplished using the powers of the Black Arts."

"But Jzherillza commanded the Black Arts far better than anyone here—and she is dead!"

"I intend to master, then unleash the full strength of the Black Arts! I shall succeed where Jzherillza failed, and when we have the Holy Man captive, we can then call upon him to remove Procyx at a time of our choosing—after we have taken all we want and stand as rulers over the whole universe.

"Now," Goren shifted about in his hovering throne. "Begin work. You must have had time to search. Surely Jzherillza made a computer index of these records . . ."

"I have found nothing. If she did, Great One, she must have hidden it well." Dualor staggered shakily to his feet, bowing his head before Goren. "I assure you, I have found nothing."

"Then I see no choice. You will have to read and translate all the records here for me in her place. I need all of her wisdom, now. I want you to create a restricted access computer file of all the appropriate records. Then you are to upload it into an RNA implant for me. It is to contain everything there is to know about Echion—spells, Dawn Era history and so forth. You understand me?"

Dualor nodded in silence.

"How long will that take?"

"Weeks. Perhaps months, I fear. Great One, I beseech you—do not do this thing . . .

"Weeks! Months!" Goren took several deep breaths against the dizziness of his excitement. "Would that be true even under the influence of Kynessotope?"

Dualor's face froze in fear. "Kynessotope? Great One, that drug is mythical!"

"I have some for such an occasion."

"It must have been very expensive."

"A king's ransom—half a world's plunder."

"Do you not wish to reserve it for . . . for something more deserving of its price?"

"I have found a deserving use in you."

Dualor's voice cracked. "I . . . I . . . Have you not heard? It is said to be fatal."

"You have betrayed me, Dualor. Do not pretend otherwise. Kynessotope is only *often* fatal. Would you not prefer only the chance of death from exhaustion under Kynessotope or certain death from execution?"

Dualor's face twitched and he bowed deeply. "As always, you are most merciful, Great One!" When the Mhyrnian's face turned up toward Goren, his eyes were swollen shut and a single trickle of blood ran down his right temple from hair that appeared slightly singed.

Goren tranzed for a dosage of the metabolism acceleration drug to be brought in. "Don't you see, Dualor? If you do this thing, it shall bring forth the hour of the Federation's greatest humiliation at last! For such a noble dispensation of justice, surely you would be willing to work under the enhancements of Kynessotope—is that not so?"

Dualor bowed his head in obedience. A moment later, the doors to Jzherillza's quarters

opened and a medic appeared carrying a cup of fluid. The medic was accompanied by two security guards. Dualor took the cup with shaking hands and drank it quickly. Then, picking up the plate he had examined earlier, he walked over to a computer terminal hovering above Jzherillza's desk. He sat, took a deep breath and, running his finger across the paper-thin, pluridium plate, mumbled low words through the terminal to the powerful computer mainframe located elsewhere in Goren's fleet.

"Don't be so gloomy!" Goren said kindly—even encouragingly—and then he settled back, watching Dualor work. "You will not regret what I have asked of you when you stand as King of Mhyrn in days to come—if you survive!"

As Goren watched, the Kynessotope took effect. It was like watching a video-graph begin to accelerate faster and faster. Goren raised all his throne's shields, watching Dualor become a blur. Record after record from the stack the Mhyrnian had made to be destroyed disappeared behind the blur only to reappear in a discard pile next to the computer terminal.

After a time, Goren opened a general tranz to the whole vessel and beyond, selecting the galaxy-wide network for his great announcement. It was an act he had only done once before in his quarter century career as a Combine President. His tranzed words, amplified back through the walls, spoke with just the right blend of subliminal emotion enhancement.

"Attention to all fleet commanders and staff. This is Goren. I command all vessels to disengage their current sorties and return to our fleets here at Procyx. This order is to be obeyed without delay."

And then his voice soared with excitement.

"Come home, and we shall soon command the very armies of Echion himself! Think of it! The minions of the Great Dragon of Night as our servants and allies! Prepare yourselves."

He watched the blur of Dualor working at the translations and compilations. Goren shook his head a little, chiding himself for, again, being too generous to his undeserving staff. He felt sure that later he would regret letting Dualor live now. But then no one else on his staff knew the mythology better than the Mhyrnian. And with Jzherillza dead, could anyone else translate the records but Dualor? Well, perhaps when the Mhyrnian was finished and if he survived, Goren could still choose to put Dualor aside any time he desired. Still, it was a pity, but it could not be helped. With that in mind, he decided, with more than a little uneasiness, that he could never trust the Mhyrnian to be alone again—and certainly never alone *here* again—not under *any* circumstances. He tranzed as much to the guard nearest the Mhyrnian who, on hearing it, looked up and nodded obedience.

Outside, the first of Goren's impressive fleets were arriving. He was anxious to go above and watch them return.

## I I

"The Holy Man and the Infidel are on Mhyrn!" Sentegor all but shouted. Never had a conviction of anything burned so powerfully within him. The answering outburst from the Council was not what he expected. It was a mixture of angry debate from the gallery of Judges, derision and confusion from the Court of the physicians and guardians of the law, and stunned silence from the Quorum of Chiefs. Only six were present. Merrimoor, the High Chief, was still off world, apparently on business. Several minutes of this noise passed before one of the seven

Chiefs regained the floor. When order returned he sat back, looking down at the small Mhyrnian with a wan smile.

"Are there others who witnessed the use of the Golden Death you claim to have seen?"

Sentegor's voice cracked. "Do not the scriptures say that one, and only one, shall come from among the Judges to prepare the way of the Holy Man and the Infidel?"

"And *you* are that one?" one of the doctors called out from the Gallery. "You are but a child. If the Holy Man and the Infidel were to come today, would they not choose one of the High Judges, at least, to announce so important an event? A child, indeed! What you have seen is a deception of the Dragon of Night. It is his Eye that gazes down upon us from the heavens. He will surely tempt and torment us with a *false* Holy Man and Infidel. Is *THAT* not written in the Holy Scriptures?"

More anxious deliberation boiled up. The Chief held up his hand for silence, looking down at Sentegor with an expression the young Mhyrnian could not exactly read. "Tell us, please. Are you the *only* one to have seen evidence of the Golden Death being used? You have found no one else to verify your story?"

"I did not think I would *need* to have verification. These are the terrible days of Grief. The time of Salvation is upon us. It is time for our redemption." He turned around to face the Council at large. "Brothers—friends—can you not see this?"

One of the older Judges stood. "What *I* see is a strapping Judge, ambitious to reach beyond his years and rule over us. Is that not the role of the Judge who should proclaim the coming of the Holy Man and the Infidel?" He spoke now in verse, using the characteristic pomposity that had recently come into popularity among the high teachers and Judges. "And the Judge shall himself be holy, an oracle as of old in the days of the Dawn. And he shall stand over the world to shield it until redemption has come."

"I do not believe that to mean a position of rulership," Sentegor answered quickly. "But one of protection, even as a mother stands over her children in times of danger!"

Laughter rippled softly across the Council. The older Judge pointed his finger at Sentegor. His voice struggled beneath an anger the young Sentegor could not understand. "How *dare* you interpret the scriptures! How DARE you! Child Blasphemer!"

"I do not blaspheme!" Sentegor pleaded with them. "Do not the scriptures also record that in the days of Grief, there should be a falling away—and that one should be raised up by the Creator to . . ."

"The days of falling away ended with the death of Ambylor the Martyr!"

"But those days were only the beginning of the days of Grief . . ."

The outburst of rage that erupted drowned out Sentegor's words. He watched in horror as several of the physicians and guardians leapt from their seats and rushed towards him. He turned and fled as fast as he could run, pushing out of the great hall that stood just outside the mountain-sized, cone-shaped structure that was the Temple of Zorl, and out into the night. He felt the sting of a stone hitting him on the shoulder and several more hurtle past him as he rushed down the thoroughfare. He darted between buildings, running farther and farther into the sleeping city. Soon, the commotion fell away to occasional laughter mingled with curses, but Sentegor continued running. His chest burned from the exertion. His mouth was dry—his head pounding, and still he ran.

At last, he broke from the narrow streets and closely huddled buildings into the city's expansive parkway honoring Ambylor. He saw the great, pluridium statue of the Martyr standing against the stars, bathed in rose-colored brilliance. Fountains splashed noisily all about

the shrine. Sentegor ran to the nearest one, falling to his knees, panting and dizzy. He splashed his face with cool water and looked back for signs of pursuit. Only darkness and quiet resided. Convinced, finally, that he was safe, Sentegor sat on the edge of the fountain and allowed himself the luxury of tears.

Perhaps they were right. Sentegor was only fifteen. The rage of humiliation flared up within him again as he relived the Council's ridicule of him with vivid recollection. Why had they done this to him? He *was* a Judge. He had seen the Golden Fires and fleets of dark ships exploding and falling into the valley. He had seen the Most High Nobleman, encircled with dazzling, golden, glorious fires and the Federationist with him—surely no one could argue that Federationists were Infidels of the first order!—destroying the dark ships of the Dragon of Night. Hadn't he seen the insignia of the Dark Dragon on the vessels?

More tears flowed—tears of bitterness—of being misunderstood and even censured for doing the right thing—and by those very persons who should have supported him—praised him—rejoiced that the hour of salvation had finally come. But no. It was not so. Things were not as they should be.

Or were they?

*Could* a young, apprentice Judge really be the one chosen to announce the coming of the Holy Man and the Infidel and then stand as a watching guardian above the world until Procyx finally disappeared into the far heavens? Now, the idea did seem foolish. Perhaps they *were* right. Perhaps he was a fool! He fell to his knees and pleaded silently with the Creator for help—for guidance—for something—anything!

Nothing came to him. No answers—no feelings, except continuing despair.

Sentegor stood after a time, looking up at the statue of Ambylor. The Great Martyr stood holding a sphere and a plate, looking heavenward with an expression of reverence.

And then a dense, stifling darkness seemed to fall over the boy. Sentegor struggled for breath, for the oppression seemed to grip cruelly at the very center of his chest. He staggered, falling to the ground beneath its incredible force. Everything spun around him. His chest felt caved in, as if he could not breathe. He groped against a pain that reached far beyond his body into his mind. This was no mere physiological sensation. It went far deeper than that. It was a horrible, smothering feeling—a heavy, crushing foreboding that scintillated with panic. Sentegor managed to pull in a short breath. The pain of it stabbed like a knife in his chest. He felt the grip of this darkness tighten quickly on him again as he let the air out and fought for another breath—then another and another. His head ached with spiraling twinges. All Sentegor could think of was escape. He struggled with all his strength to stand, making as if to run.

"Do not go," a deep, quiet, even voice spoke from behind him. He turned to see an impressive, broad-shouldered Mhyrnian Priest dressed in brilliant, red robes that all but glowed from some Inner Light. These were the robes of a Most High Nobleman of the god Zorl. This Sentegor knew from the writings.

"You have done well," the Most High Nobleman said smiling slightly. "It is all right. All is well, for I have come at last."

The crushing heaviness fell away, but not all, and now a new sensation washed over him—a heady sense of thrill. The thrill was real enough—undeniable. It was a powerful, emotional force that was undeniably compelling and yet . . . and yet, it felt, somehow, wrong—incomplete. Something about it . . . was it . . . it felt forced—perhaps even rancid below the surface—outwardly dazzling but stale if one could strip away the exterior to see inside—stale or worse.

No! This was not right! He tried and tried, but could not put his finger on exactly what

was wrong. Or was it just he? Was he so far out of communion with the Creator that the best he could feel, now, was a stale sense of incompleteness? The dark heaviness stabbed through him again at that thought. Where was this oppression coming from? The Creator? If this were the Holy Man, should not such fears be absent in His presence—gone? Shouldn't the thrill he had felt only moments before be a deep sense of complete joy, rather than just a thrill edged with . . . with decay? It should be—must be—shouldn't it?

"Who are you?" Sentegor ventured after a moment, his voice trembling.

The man smiled. "You know me—surely. Kneel before me, for I am He whose coming you have foretold. You have done well in announcing my coming, and for that I shall lift you high above all others, and you shall rule at my side."

Sentegor began to kneel but something stopped him. He looked up into the eyes of this man. "But where is the other?" he spoke. "The Infidel?"

The Most High Nobleman's expression fell. "What does that matter? He will come soon enough. Kneel before me, little one."

Sentegor stood, backing away. "You are not the One!"

"Kneel before me!" The man's voice rose to a thunderous roar. "I am the Holy Man! You must go before me, proclaiming that I come! Now! Raise your voice from the tops of every building—spare not—let no one sleep for the sound of it! I have come at last!"

Sentegor ran in terror.

"I shall find another!" the voice cried after him, the pitch of his voice veering wildly. "You *are* nothing but a foolish child!"

Sentegor ran towards the gates of the city, tears coming again. There was an explosion next to him. He turned to see the holy man encircled with fire, bolts of energy leaping from his hands at Sentegor.

"*I* am the Holy Man! Bow down before me!"

But Sentegor ran on, for the fire encircling this man was merely fire. The golden energies that had encircled the true Holy Man Sentegor had seen had been dazzling—painful to look upon, and had at that same instant filled Sentegor with an incredibly full, sweet, burning rightness—joy—even peace. It had been an overwhelming certainty that the man whom Sentegor saw then, the man whose glory destroyed these dark vessels of the Black Dragon as the Prophecies stated—this holy man had been truly imbued with power from the Creator.

Here and now, this man falling ever farther behind Sentegor who hurled mere fire at him had no such glory, nor was his presence sweet. While tingling with some stirring excitement that was, in the end, false and darkly appealing, it seemed to speak to baser instincts and desires. By comparison it was, albeit beguiling, gaping in its emptiness—even cankering.

Sentegor prayed to the Creator for protection as he ran, and never once did fire touch him.

## III

The work of translation and compilation had taken only five hours under the influence of Kynessotope, but Dualor lay dead in Jzherillza's quarters. His form looked starved—an incredible change from the corpulence he had once had. Goren saw how the dark robes hung almost comically over the loose skin that covered a body emaciated beyond the power to maintain life. In Dualor's hand there was a final plate of pluridium, clutched in the bony fingers and held

tight against the dead Mhyrnian's chest. Goren tranzed one of the security guards to go and take it from the body's grasp. The guard obeyed, bringing the pluridium artifact over to him. Goren examined it. On one side there were just rows of hieroglyphs, but when he turned it over, Goren saw an elaborate, engraved drawing.

It was a scene, obviously involving Procyx. Goren studied it for a time, trying to comprehend it. After a while, he put the plate aside and frowned at the still form of Dualor. He tried to access this plate from the RNA implant the Mhyrnian had prepared for him. Again and again he tried to remember this record but could not. So, Dualor had held out on him. In anger, he fired a bolt of energy at the remains, which exploded in a powdery spray. He picked up the plate again, trying to make sense of it on his own. The very fact that Dualor had withheld it from his RNA implant in the face of death led Goren to suspect that it must hold some importance—a final act of defiance, but what kind of defiance?

This plate obviously had no reference to any of the spells or powers of the Black Arts. It was clearly Mhyrnian—perhaps it merely contained some elusion to the Procyx Myth that Dualor cherished. Yes, perhaps that was it. Among Jzherillza's effects he must have found an artifact on the Procyx Myth that he cherished—one that did not apply to the mastery of the Black Arts. Well, let him have his little treasure in death. Why not? Goren was known for his generosity, even to the condemned. Yes, yes—that was all this was. And yet a subtle feeling of uneasiness persisted. Suddenly Goren experienced the distinct impression that he was being shown something of importance—something that if he chose now to abandon his plans, he might yet be safe. That if he chose to proceed, his fate was, at best, uncertain; at worst, doomed. Grunting humorlessly, Goren stashed the plate under his throne and, rising with some effort, climbed the steps of the waiting holo-dais.

It was as if Goren stood at the center of a vast hall. He could see and be seen by his fleet commanders, ships captains and crew ten million strong, holo-transmitted all around him, looking like a vast sea of worshipping humanity. They cheered in a deafening roar at the sight of him, chanting a cadenced praise and boastfully shaking their fists over their heads in time to the chants. Goren smiled, amused and basking in the adoration of his troops. How he loved them all—each one. He raised his hand for silence, which came immediately.

"Good, good friends," he called to them with a flare of artificially enhanced beneficence pumped into the transmission. "The hour of our final victory has come—at long last!"

A deafening cheer erupted from his followers. He smiled again, raising his hand for quiet. "I have assumed all the powers of the Black Arts which our loyal martyr Jzherillza possessed before her death, and more—even all the powers of the Black Arts."

He pointed at Procyx as it blazed above them all. "Procyx has shielded us for decades—protected us from the Federationists. But Procyx shall now endow us with powers beyond anything we, or the Federationists, have ever imagined possible."

A new cheering arose then fell silent beneath Goren's uplifted hand.

"Within Procyx itself reside a billion fleets of a hundred vessels each—sleeping—all awaiting the return of the Dragon of Night. I stand before you today in His place—in the place of the Dragon of Night, even Echion. Behold my glory!" He shouted, and with the touch of a finger upon the amulet that he had taken from Jzherillza's body, Goren's frame flashed into that of a tall, muscular, handsome warrior. He was dressed in a simple, black uniform—his hair white, his eyes piercing. All about him, bolts of black energy coursed and flowed in a dark circle.

The dark glories fell away. Goren smiled at the audible gasp from his troops.

"*I* am Echion now!" he shouted, holding up his hand, fist clenched. Suddenly the room

exploded with cheers—cheers bordering on frenzy. "Victory!" he shouted again and again as a new cheer erupted.

"You all have your orders for fleet and vessel disposition. When we awake our sleeping brothers, we shall command as many ships as there are stars in the galaxy. This is the day of our glory. Turn, now," he pointed to Procyx. "Invincibles, you shall accompany me first. Raise your Hypermotility buffers to full power and let us, the greatest and boldest warriors of all time, plunge with full confidence into the very center of the Eye of the Procyx!"

He turned to the commander of his flagship and nodded once. The holo-transmissions of the fleet commanders and crew faded away. He stepped down and returned to his throne. It lifted to its usual hovering and glided forward toward the wide view-screen. Goren watched with eagerness.

A thousand of his crack battle transports, surrounded by tens of thousands of fighters, began pouring toward Procyx. He watched the dazzling, blue coherent orb grow larger and larger as his flagship joined the approach. There were only the slightest of buffetings as his ship passed through the countless filamentary wanderings of Procyxian energy that surrounded the dazzling enigma. A massive tentacle of brilliant blue energy loomed dead ahead. Shining sparkles of varying colors wandered within its permutating, intricate fabric, each blazing in coherent light and each pulsating with its own, unique rhythm. Some were flung off as the "prominence" twisted and wandered like a thing alive. One of the freed sparkles hurtled past the flagship very close. It revealed itself a coherent orb, tumbling and flaming its own tendrils. A piercing sine wave screeched from the walls as it passed and plunged beyond, outward into space.

"Increase temporal deflection to maximum," Goren tranzed. Beneath him the ship throbbed and hummed with deep, resonant power.

Procyx grew so close that its limb seemed an intense, radiant, blue horizon spreading before the flagship. All evidence of its spherical shape were gone. The far away stars of the galaxy shone behind it, compressed and above the limb. It was as though space above, behind and around Procyx had collapsed, incredibly flattened—as if the universe itself had been compressed down to two dimensions and could be seen all at once, displayed as on an infinite flat map that had been turned horizontally beyond Procyx.

Goren's ships began leaping into the blinding surface of the End Star, vanishing in swollen flashed of white brilliance.

"We have lost contact with the fleet inside," the flagship commander announced. "Should we retreat?"

Goren turned on him. "Of course not. They have entered a different universe. How could we expect to communicate with them? Proceed and enter Procyx."

The limb of the End Star pitched suddenly upward and now only staggering blue glory filled the view-screen, stirred to incredible patterns by whatever energies powered it.

"Entrance in ten seconds," the commander announced.

Goren found himself breathing deeply, holding his head high.

The last instant before the flagship penetrated the surface, Goren heard . . . voices? Wind? Water? He could not be sure, for it came and went so quickly that it sounded like a hissing shimmer.

Utter blackness ensued, accompanied by a rushing sound like an ocean of water pouring down across mountains of solid rock. Swirling shapes stirred within the darkness—clouds of heaviness deeper than the darkness. It seemed blacker, here than any intergalactic space Goren had ever seen. And yet, as he gazed at it with deliberateness, the darkness didn't seem so stark.

Goren could see movement within it. He eased his throne forward, squinting to try to see better. The darkness did move as in the slow churning of pitch thunderheads. But here there was no lightning, only degrees of darkness beyond black.

At last, the flagship burst free of this dark storm and Goren beheld patches of strange, whirling light that changed wherever he looked. Through and among all these he caught sight of the occasional glowing energy ports of his own vessels. When he looked directly at his ships, he could see their depolarizer blisters glowing violet. Good. Then all the ships' systems would work here. There was a ten percent chance they wouldn't—a possibility he never disclosed to anyone.

"Look there," someone whispered. Goren turned and found a terrible, fascinating wonder. The swirling lights he had seen wherever he looked had resolved themselves into what seemed to be long tunnels of flashing, vortexing clouds. At the end of each tunnel there rested stars or worlds—other universes as numerous as there are sands of the sea. Even the slightest displacement of the eyes revealed a different tunnel ending in a different cosmos. Goren moved his eyes all about.

This was incredible!

One universe had red skies filled with black stars; another had a white brilliance so dazzling that he quickly turned away; one was deep blue with bolts of lavender lightning, frozen in space—hanging like myriad stars; another shone stars of dazzling, coherent colors—brilliant. Here, Goren managed to affix his gaze. Points of brilliance drifted slowly down the tunnel toward him and past his fleet like falling bubbles. The walls of the flagship rang and sang as each passed by, like the sparking orbs Procyx had hurtled past him as the flagship had approached.

"Steady," Goren said after recovering himself. The effect was mesmerizing. "Close all viewers for a time. Search for the billion fleets using scanners only."

The view-screen darkened, returning sanity to the vessel. But though there was a sense of safe enclosure, the humming rings of passing orbs continued. Goren sighed, waiting. He thought back upon Dualor's plate again. The recollection of it continued to haunt him. He turned his throne around, glided over toward it and tranzed a guard to hand it to him again.

The plate seemed to glow at places with an inner illumination. The golden sun within the cone shone so brightly that Goren found himself squinting. The white inner robe being revealed by the shorter figure on the left side facing the edge with its accompanying flame symbols also shone with its own inner brilliance along with the twelve sun symbols at the top, in a variety of colors. Puzzling, he suspected that the bright blue star centered among the row of suns and surrounded by its own shining flame symbols was Procyx. Goren began to understand Dualor's treasuring interest in the plate. It revealed things. But what did it all mean?

"Contact ahead," the commander tranzed him. "Artificial structures . . . computer tabulation counts ten thousand of them . . . linked together by some sort of energy strands . . . can't identify energy type . . . size of each structure planetary in proportion . . . fifty thousand kilometers in diameter . . ."

"Open view-screen," Goren tranzed. Again the barrage of Procyx's interior invaded his gaze. He tried moving his head all about, trying to see, but the intrusion of a new tunnel to a different universe with every slight motion drove him to distraction. "Where the Gates are they?" he muttered. "Give me a scanner read fix." A moment later ten thousand small flashing diamonds appeared across the surface of the view-screen.

" . . . Shape of all structures appears to be generally spherical, but open to space . . .apparently . . ."

"Yes! Yes. Those would be the harbors."

"Smaller structures seem to be imbedded within . . . strange structural webbing and outcroppings . . ."

"Is there a ring-shaped vessel among them?"

"Can't distinguish one as yet. Our ships are fanning out. There's a lot of debris . . . The . . . er, harbor worlds are themselves arranged in a spherical formation . . . pluridium! Imps, there's tons of the stuff—all over the place!"

"Forget the pluridium. Look for a ring-shaped vessel. There's got to be one somewhere in that formation!"

"Wait . . . wait . . . yes! Affirmative, Great One." A larger diamond shape began flashing. "Contact has been made."

"Excellent! That would be the Ark of Hurd—the command ship. Tell all vessels to lock a course by instrument, ignore visual and approach the ring-shaped vessel. Ready maximum firepower. Shields at one-ten percent. Take us in."

"Affirm, Great One. The rest of the fleet has entered Procyx as well and stands behind us."

"Attention! This is Goren. Deploy as instructed—ten battle transports for each harbor world. Release and position shaped neural disrupters for maximum firepower around each harbor world—no, wait. Let's double that just to be sure. I want to be able to knock out all life aboard those worlds at my discretion while still keeping the vessels and hardware intact for our use. Link detonations via hyperspacial relay to my throne. When that is done, assume standard attack formation code amber outside the neural disrupter shells, then hold your positions. Readiness is to be maintained at top alert."

A hundred thousand vessels spread out, shooting past Goren's flagship to surround the huge, spherical flotilla. Within minutes, each planet-sized vessel of the billion fleets was surrounded by hundreds of neural disruption devices backed by ten fully-armed battle transports.

"Great One," the commander of the Invincibles tranzed him. "The Invincibles cannot approach the command ship."

"Why not?"

"There is a unique defense system protecting it. They request Your Greatness approach as well and advise them."

Goren smiled. "Perhaps an incantation under the Black Arts is required here. Take us in."

The flagship moved forward, past one of the great harbor ships of the billion fleets. Goren watched it with fascination and a strange feeling that seemed more like hunger than anything else. The world-sized vessel looked as if it were nothing but a conglomeration of what must have been ten million smaller ships, each moored in its own full-serve dock. Navigation beacons flashed, and red strobe trails coursed across the harbor world in ever varying complexities.

"Give me visual amplification," Goren tranzed quickly. He magnified the view-screen's display of the harbor world. The terrifying noses of massive attack ships pointed outward from the surface in row upon row. They looked like the beaks of some hideous, armored bird of prey designed to rip and tear flesh, mutated and contorted into the most horrible of both reptilian and insectile ferocity. Their appearance gave Goren a sudden thrill of fear and for just a moment he shuddered under a panic that nearly drove him to call off this enterprise. Instead, after taking a deep breath, he turned his attention past them to try to see the Ark of Hurd.

Once beyond the shell of harbor worlds, the disconcerting, tunneling ambiences of Procyx's interior fell inexplicably away. Inside this formation of worlds there was now only vivid darkness. Or was it only darkness? Goren sat forward, straining to see more, for the deep night seemed

alive, not the way the interior of Procyx had—alive with storm-like turbulences, but alive in an organic sense. He saw fleeting images just out of the corners of his eyes—was it the fluttering of black wings, as if hundreds of bats or perhaps thousands of parasitic insects swarmed just beyond his field of vision? He turned his head quickly to try to see them, but whenever he did they disappeared. Each subsequent time he tried to catch them again, they were gone in an instant. Eventually he discovered that he could only see them peripherally when his attention was focused elsewhere.

"Command ship is directly ahead, Great One," the commander tranzed. Goren tried to ignore the annoying, peripheral distractions in an attempt to find the powerful, legendary vessel. Finally, amidst the glow of his Invincibles, Goren saw the massive, ring-shaped starship. It pulsated with what must have numbered thousands of mysterious, brown brilliances that were difficult to focus on. They shone through a fuzzy haze surrounding the Ark of Hurd like undulating waves of dark wheat. Their motion drifted in slow ripples that made them look as if they were under water.

"What are those things?"

The flagship slowed to a cautious reconnaissance speed. The swaying fuzziness began to resolve itself into translucent tentacles that wandered sedately, albeit hungrily, as if the command ship were some form of nightmarish anemone. Goren watched the flow of tentacles in fascination, glimpsing, sometimes, the wreckage of strange starships caught within them. All the trapped vessels looked alien—distinctly alien in their design. Some of the ships still glowed with power while what looked like tethered spiders clung to their sides, apparently draining them of their energy. Goren swallowed nervously. No wonder none of his Invincibles dared approach. The Ark of Hurd protected itself from attack by catching and feeding off the energies of any vessels that drew too near. But now a new question arose in Goren's mind. Where had these alien vessels come from?

"Should we fire on them?" the commander tranzed.

"Negative," Goren replied. "It looks like those things *feed* on energy. Besides, we do not know what they are capable of. I told you that an incantation might be called for . . ."

"Great One . . ." another officer's tranz interrupted. "I think you should see this. Request permission to roll ship 180 degrees."

"Granted," Goren replied. He found himself swinging his great arms as if to ward off the dark swarms that persistently tormented his periphery. He perspired profusely now, despite the circulating coolant his throne provided, but then the cursed coolant hardly ever worked anyway!

The flagship rolled over and now, directly above Goren, there hovered what looked like an immense eye. Its cornea filled the entire open space within the ring of the Ark of Hurd and the pupil was utterly, dimensionally black. Bolts of lightning danced occasionally across the expanse of the dark, velvety, bloody red cornea.

"The Eye of the Procyx!" someone whispered.

"Scanners show it to be a continuum warp of some kind, Great One. It is dormant, at the moment—barely functional, but energy levels are rock solid constant—maintained presumably to keep it open."

"Open to where? And why didn't we see it when we approached?" Goren asked. No one ventured an answer. "Hmmm. Well, turn us back, and keep a vigilant watch on that warp."

"Yes, Great One."

Goren now tried to "remember" the tentacle defense systems of the Ark of Hurd from the RNA implant Dualor had made for him. This command ship was said to be a predator of the

highest possible order. Its energy requirements were voracious, even when asleep. Access to the Ark was available only through the Black Arts. Goren thought through the various incantations again and again—nothing specific jumped out on him. He decided to back off from the obvious and concentrate on the metaphorical. He remembered all the incantations again, recalling them carefully and finally hesitating on an unusual one—the Chant of the Blossom. There were no cross-references in his memory, but Goren felt that this one might well be the one that would work, remembering how the Ark had looked like an anemone from a distance. He paused, remembered the ritual for a moment, then standing, he opened his arms wide.

"Miall kon Vor Scalliat," he began. Immediately, the tentacles ceased their rippling wanders and hesitated, suspended—paralyzed. Goren felt a surge of encouragement. He brought his hands together, palms pressing against each other. "Verahnteeos Coln Echion! Kilstra tohn Echion Polterra! Nashkt!"

The captive alien ships began drifting out of their traps, tumbling off into space. Goren watched with swelling pride as the tentacles began withdrawing inside the ring. A cheer rose up from the crew of the flagship. Moments later, all traces of the tentacles were gone, and the smooth surface of the Ark of Hurd lay exposed to Goren and his Invincibles.

Red strobes began flashing at intervals all about the ring. Docking bays began to open, protruding in readiness. Goren clenched his fist in triumph.

"Now I want TRIPLE level neural disrupters set around this vessel. Once they are in place and linked to my throne the troop ships can move in—carefully—move in and dock," he commanded. "I want full body armor, including neural screens on all troops as well as hover packs. No one is to touch any surface inside—not floors, walls or ceilings. Nothing! Take as long as needed to occupy—but I say again, DO NOT TOUCH ANYTHING! Understand? Alert me when all is in readiness. Goren out."

The Invincible ships began docking. Goren forced his eagerness into tenuous abeyance by tranzing for a cup of tri-kafe and trying to sip quietly on it while his troops carefully took possession of the Ark of Hurd. The drink did nothing to calm him. He snubbed a button to push his throne's air conditioner into overdrive and felt a slight cooling throughout his suit but found he still had, now and then, to wipe perspiration from his brow. When the call finally came in that the Ark had been secured by the Invincibles as per his instructions, Goren all but spilled his drink trembling to put the cup aside.

"Excellent, commander. Stand in readiness."

"Great One," the tranz of the Invincible commander held a tone of uneasiness that Goren picked up immediately. "I strongly suggest that you bring your entire personal Guard with you."

Goren frowned. "That may be perceived as a sign of weakness when I wake the ship."

"As you wish, Great One. But I would still recommend it."

Goren shifted about uneasily. "I appreciate your concern for me, commander, but I feel I must make the right impression when I wake the ship's Guardian."

"It's just that . . . well, you have not yet seen the inside of this vessel."

"So what of it? Am I a child to cower at sleeping shadows? I will not bring my Guard in with me."

The answering silence satisfied Goren that the commander had finally relented. It took every ounce of courage Goren had to transfer himself now, alone, into the docking bay of his flagship and move silently between rows of his crack personal Guard, all standing alert at his silent passage. The look of admiration their faces wore did help lift his spirits for a time. He knew that each one of them had heard the exchange he had had with the Invincible commander

and Goren had always counted on the admiration of his Guard to insure their loyalty. The captain of his guard stepped forward one last time as Goren slid toward the doors of the docking bay.

"We will come with you, Great one, if that is your desire. You are too valuable to us to allow you to enter unnecessary danger."

Goren turned his throne about, facing his them. "My good men! Stand down. I declare a full recess for you all. You are dismissed. Enjoy a well-deserved rest."

The men broke into casual relief, taking off their helmets and securing their weapons. The captain stepped forward, inclining his head to whisper to him. "I think you're making a mistake—not taking us in with you."

Goren smiled. "I'm not afraid of a sleeping ship—even Echion's command ship."

"That's not what worries me."

"What, then?"

"I'm talking about the danger of an assassination attempt."

"From someone among the Invincibles? Why should they . . . have you heard any scuttlebutt?"

"You command millions of men. True, the Invincibles are the best of those men, but the best are often the most ambitious as well. Plus, there will always be grousers as well as opportunists, more than ready and looking for a chance to take matters into their own hands. These are the ones I worry about most. Is that not so?"

"Yes," Goren hesitated. "But here at the Ark I believe such treachery can be turned to my purposes. Do you know of any such opportunists among the Invincibles?"

"Intelligence *has* suggested a few likely candidates."

Goren nodded. "Arrest them. Hold them here for me until I call for one, then bring one inside, bound. I believe he will be able to serve me far better that way than as an Invincible of questionable loyalty. What will happen to such will serve an excellent example of my displeasure with any others of similar bend. Besides, if what legend says about the Ark of Hurd is true, I suspect even the most intent of them will be too busy keeping their heads about them than to try and remove me."

"I shall do as you command. Good luck, then, Great One." the captain stepped back and Goren turned to face the open doors of the dock—doors that opened into a fishy, musty smelling darkness.

# Chapter Two
# The Mountain

## I

There was a sense of timelessness, and no matter where Reeber looked out through the twenty-meter domed control bubble of the Nebo, all he could see was fire. But it was not fire exactly—energy, yes—something *between* fire and lightning, and all of it a vivid, intensely rich golden color.

The ship resonated from these energies without. Reeber had finally accustomed himself to the floor, the walls—everywhere within this room glowing as if they were golden hot, and yet nothing radiated heat or showed signs of softening. He turned back to look again with wonder upon the pedestal that stood alone in the center of the control bubble.

Twin command stations on raised daises had occupied the center of the bubble when he and the others had first entered. But the moment the Coss sphere had been brought in, the command stations had disassembled into the floor. Moments later a cylindrical, pluridium pedestal had pushed up from the dais, a perfectly smooth, concave hemispheric depression draining from its top. Morse had not hesitated in placing the Coss sphere into this central depression. Later, he had told Reeber he had seen all of this in a dream. When the sphere had come to rest in that depression it had fit it perfectly. A moment later, the dome had flashed to transparency and the walls beneath the cove had begun to glow in the way they shone now. The Nebo had lifted from the Old World of its own accord, then into space and beyond, unfalteringly into the accretion array that comprised the Eye of Polyphemus.

They had all puzzled at the approach of the Cygnus and the sudden intervention of five other Vanguards that had cut off their view of the first. Finally a tremendous, brilliant maelstrom of golden lightning and dazzling fire had begun swirling about them, obscuring the universe, and persisted until that very moment.

How much time had actually passed since then—real time that passed steadily beyond the energies that surrounded the Nebo? Reeber could not venture a guess. Perhaps no time at all. Perhaps minutes, hours or days. Morse had told him they now occupied some sort of ultimate, inter-dimensional realm he, himself, had only glimpsed on rare occasions. Whatever else there was about the "here" where they found themselves now, time could be whatever one wanted it to be—or needed it to be.

Reeber reviewed the events that had transpired since they had been engulfed in the dazzling, golden storm. He had been able to talk to Morse extensively about the Commodore's dream—the one that had resulted in their rescue. In the passage of that time, Reeber had eaten twice, slept a full night's rest, and now stood gazing out into that deep sea or sky of radiant gold that milled about the Nebo in its own unknowable paths and purposes. But again, as Reeber tried to estimate the actual time spent, even these events had seemed to take mere moments—the twinkling of an eye.

In all that time he had seen neither Melana nor the two Mhyrnian children anywhere. He was ashamed to admit that this was something of a relief to him. Since coming on board

he had avoided contact with the children of Metrasor, not because he was particularly uncomfortable around children, but because he wasn't sure what to say or even if he should say anything to them about what he suspected concerning the fate of their father. Melana had taken them elsewhere. Reeber he had not seen Celeste, either. Morse had told him that she was off somewhere, studying— 'intenting,' the ancient writings etched in nearly every wall of the starship.

"We're headed somewhere, I'm sure of that." Morse spoke from behind him. Reeber turned to see the Commodore standing over the Coss sphere, gazing down on it. His face was underlit with the intense blue illumination that shone up from the star-shaped jewel encrusted in the upper pole of the Coss sphere. "And have you noticed that the spiraling inscriptions are gone?"

Reeber joined him. It was true. The upper hemisphere no longer had any hieroglyphs.

"They always told you where Procyx was in relation to the sphere," Reeber said quietly. "We discovered that before we left. The larger star-shaped glyph was a one and the smaller, a zero. The top hemisphere told you the distance to Procyx in wavelengths of Procyxian light. The bottom hemisphere told you the same distance in wavelengths of sound—the exact sound Procyx made when it first appeared."

"Interesting. I wonder *why* the hieroglyphs are gone?" Morse knelt down, examining the central band with its ring of thirteen triangular jewels. "Wait a minute. Not everything's gone. Take a look."

Reeber grunted as he knelt. Squinting, he saw in the gap between the red and violet triangular stones an engraving he had never noticed there before—a pictograph.

"What do you suppose it means?"

Celeste Jenson walked into the control bubble. As on the Vanguards, the wall opened like a pool of metal and closed behind her.

"Well, where have you been?" Reeber straightened.

"Studying."

"Have you discovered anything?"

"Intentions, only. I'm an intentor. While I can't read the words I *can* comprehend a measure of what the hieroglyphs say, indirectly. Behind all written language is intent—right? So, while I can't directly translate the hieroglyphs I can know much of their meaning, occasionally even better than by direct translation."

"Fine! Fine!" Reeber struggled against impatience. "Tell us what you have found!"

But Celeste hesitated. "It's difficult to understand and explain in words. The intelligences that etched these walls understood so much more about everything than I do that my comprehension of them is limited to the emotional level. Sometimes, though, I *see* things—pictures, scenes—that sort of thing."

"Can you give us an example? Anything?"

She took a deep breath. "Hmm. All right. I'll give it a try.

For nearly a full minute, Celeste stood with her eyes closed. When she opened them, she looked at Reeber.

"Some of what I have seen concerns you, Clement."

"Me? How is that possible?"

She shrugged. "You are not mentioned by name, of course—this ship is so very ancient. But I know it's you, from both the feeling I get from your personality and from the office you now hold."

"What do you mean by 'office?'"

"Office—like some governing position." She scratched at her scalp. "And yes, it *is* you . . . and Melana, too. A lot of it's about her too, but not yet."

"Not yet."

"No. Not until later."

Reeber shook his head, bewildered. "I'm sorry . . ."

"I'm not doing very well at this. You don't understand, do you? I was afraid you wouldn't. It's not just you, though. I don't think anyone . . . " She sighed. "All right, all right. Let me try to break it down to specifics.

"You are as a father with no children. You will have your children, and you and they will be a means of restoring and spreading great and marvelous lost secrets and truths throughout every galaxy of the universe—truths that are the basis of all that is good and wonderful and right. That's the intent of all this." She lifted her hand as if pointing out the entirety of the Nebo. "And it shall prepare all things for the coming of some great event . . ."

"The End Star of Joy," Reeber added, half questioning, half knowing it to be so.

"I don't know what that is, but it seems right. Here, write it down and show it to me."

Reeber searched for something to write on. When he couldn't, he knelt down and wrote it with his finger on the floor. Celeste watched. Finishing, he looked back at her. She nodded.

"Yes. That's it. You will do something important—you and Melana together, that is. But that time is removed—yet to come. As for now, you are the Eye that reveals the self."

Reeber looked down toward the robe he wore beneath the cloak Metrasor had given him.

"That's the office—part of it, at least. You understand that much. The writings reveal that you have duties that relate to that robe. When the time is right, you will go to a room somewhere in this ship that will allow you to give away the Eye that reveals the self to a man—an Infidel who will, in turn, use it to slay false ones—terrible men—demons."

"Infidel?" Reeber paused. "Infidel!" Where had he heard that term recently? "There's something I should know about an Infidel . . . I can't seem to put my finger on it." It was an annoying stretch to try to remember something that was just beyond recollection. "Infidel" *was* there in his mind. It was important to understanding things. But for the life of him, Reeber couldn't place it.

"Infidel . . . Infidel . . ."

"I don't know what it all means, but, apparently, you'll know what to do at the proper time."

"Infidel . . . Hmm? What?"

"Apparently, you will know what it means and what you must do when the time comes."

"Hmm. I . . ."

"You do believe that you will know what to do at the proper time, even though you don't understand it?"

Reeber shrugged, looking around him. "I've given up unbelief almost completely." His eyes fell on the Coss sphere again, its blue jewel shining like Procyx itself. "Now, tell me—what have the writings told about the Coss plate?"

Celeste shook her head. "Nothing specific. But I know that the answers to all things are recorded here on this ship. I just haven't found them yet."

"Have you shared any of this with Melana?"

"No. It isn't time for her to worry about that yet. She has her hands full with those two boys."

A sudden guilt overtook Reeber. He really should try to find them—give Melana support or

advice or a break—something.

"Do you know where she took them?" he asked Celeste, but Morse answered.

"Don't you know where they are?"

"I haven't known where to look. How do you find your way around?"

"I'm surprised you haven't learned that yet. Just think where you want to go and walk toward the wall."

Reeber laughed once. "Really? Well, I haven't . . . I mean I . . . so that's how it works. I didn't think I could find them," he said, a little more guiltily. He was ashamed to admit to himself that he must really have wanted to avoid the tricky situation of conversing with two Mhyrnian boys who might well be orphans by now. The Nebo, apparently able to read his thoughts or at least his intentions had, obediently, *not* shown him where to go.

He cleared his throat. "You know, I wondered about that. I mean . . . well, I guess I thought it was luck before, just sort of heading for the wall and winding up where I wanted to be. I guess I thought I was just exploring and lucky to find where it was I wanted to go so quickly." He looked at Morse. "How did *you* know about it?"

"The dream."

"Right. The dream," Reeber nodded, still trying to keep his intellectual balance in an environment where all the rules seemed upside-down and backward while never chaotic. "Guess I'll give it a try." He turned, chose a spot on the far wall and deliberately, forcefully thought about wanting—needing—to find Melana. The wall opened before him into a pleasant room where the walls did not glow.

Melana sat on a couch, holding the younger of Metrasor's sons on her lap. He sucked his thumb, huddled up against her breast. The older boy sat across the arms of a nearby chair, arms folded, looking away from both Reeber and Melana. She looked up as he came in, her face suddenly, immensely relieved to see him.

"Hello," he said uneasily. After a moment he pulled up another chair and sat tentatively among them. Oreb, the child on Melana's lap, looked at him then turned his face away, almost trying to bury himself in her. Reeber waited for a few minutes, then looked over at Kishkor in the chair. The older boy would not acknowledge him—pointedly so. Reeber looked at Melana, who stared at him, bewildered.

"I . . ." Reeber began, just rambling but now feeling, somehow, that he should talk to these boys. "I think we should talk about your father."

Silence.

"He is dead, like mommy." Oreb said then went back to sucking his thumb.

Reeber wanted to say something soothing, like *we don't really know that Metrasor is dead*. But the old man had more than intimated that he was going to his death, and somehow Reeber knew that the Mhyrnian was gone. It didn't even occur to him to wonder how he knew that kind of thing any more. He just knew it. He nodded his head slowly.

"We don't know that for sure," Reeber said. Then after a pause, his conscience stirred him to add, "But I think that it may well be true. He suggested as much. I . . . I am very, very sorry."

More silence. Then Kishkor said, "We are not to be upset by that. It was father's command that we leave him. I have obeyed him."

"We both obeyed him!" Oreb chimed in defensively. "Not just you!"

Kishkor ignored him. "We can care for ourselves. You may leave us alone, if you wish." He half turned his head toward Melana. "Both of you."

Melana's face winced at that. Reeber fought an urge to scold this brat for such blatant

unkindness to a woman in whom he knew no unkindness could ever take root. One look at Melana's face told him that she saw his struggle to protect her. She shook her meaning that he should say nothing. Reeber stood up, trying to give himself time to cool off.

"We do not need you," Kishkor went on. "Don't you understand? Father taught us to care for ourselves. You are infidels who know nothing of sacred things! Why don't you just leave us alone? We care for each other! Go!!"

"Stop it!" Oreb suddenly cried. "Just stop it!"

"And who's going to stop me? A crying babe who still sucks his thumb?"

Oreb scrambled to climb off Melana's lap, his eyes raging, fists clenched. Kishkor moved as if to jump on his brother, but Reeber held him back while Melana restrained Oreb. The older boy turned on Reeber, raging—swinging wildly at him.

"You're father entrusted you to us," Reeber said, fending off the blows.

"I'll destroy you with the Golden Death! Infidel! You are the ones who brought my father's death. I swear I will destroy you!"

Reeber took hold of Kishkor's shoulders, holding him firmly.

"Curse you all to Echion's depths!" Kishkor screamed at him. "Curse you for taking away father! Curse you! I curse you! I curse you!" and suddenly the boy staggered into tears.

Reeber stood staring at the sobbing child, not knowing what he should do. He had never felt so helpless. At last—uneasily yet boldly, he tried pulling the boy to him. At first, Kishkor struggled. Reeber waited—still holding on invitingly, but waiting. At last the boy relented, letting his tears go fully, and finally. Reeber pulled him close, comfortingly. Suddenly Reeber found himself aching inside. All the memories of his own parents' death flooded through him unexpectedly, and tears welled up, unbidden. He sniffed quietly as he held the boy's head tenderly.

"It's all right that it hurts when they're gone." Reeber said, his own voice thick with emotion. He hugged the boy tightly, now. "Do you hear? It's all right that it hurts!"

Reeber could barely see Melana and Oreb's faces for the blurring of his own eyes.

"It's all right that it hurts," Reeber said over and over again, stroking the boy's head. He looked over at Melana, his eyes having cleared some. Her eyes were also moist and Oreb's face was buried in her breast. She held the child as tightly as he held her.

Time passed in this quiet. Kishkor was the first to settle down. He pulled away from Reeber at last, a bit embarrassed. Immediately he went to Oreb, pulling at his brother's hand. Together, a moment later, they left the room in silence, not looking back. Reeber found himself alone with Melana.

"Oh, Clement," she came to him, sliding easily into his arms. "I don't know if I can do this! Will this ever end? Will we ever be free to be together—just us—the two of us?" She sighed. "I know they're sweet boys . . ."

"I don't know about the older one . . ."

"He's just trying to cope—that's all." She sighed again, tired—the kind of tired that comes from too much emotional strain for too long a time. She looked down, bewildered. "I . . . I just can't be a mother—not yet. I'm not even a wife! But the Mhyrnian—I know I'm supposed to take care of them—*we're* supposed to take care of them. These boys need someone. What'll we do?"

Reeber thought for a moment. "We're supposed to take them to Mhyrn—right? Isn't that what their father said? They have family on Mhyrn.

"Well, I guess you're right. Maybe." Melana thought for a moment then shook her head. She looked up at him again, then sighed. "No, Clement. I can't help it. I . . . I just don't think so. I

had a dream last night . . ."

Reeber's heart fell. A dream. Polyphemus spoke to Vanguard commanders through their dreams.

"It was just a while after we had lifted from the Old World and fallen into this—this burning place—wherever we are. It was when the boys had finally fallen off to asleep. I don't know where you were. It was so quiet. I dozed off. The dream . . ." Melana paused, shaking her head. Over and over again she shook her head, struggling with what she was going to say next. Finally, she looked up at him again. "Clement, I don't know how to say this. I don't even know if it's right." And then, resolutely "Yes I do. Clement, these boys are supposed to become our children."

"What?" Reeber balked. "Now wait a minute! I can't see how we . . . I haven't had any dreams like that. You expect me to . . . look I haven't had training on bringing up children! I hate children! I mean, well, I don't really hate them—I just have no patience—no tolerance . . . Besides, they have family on Mhyrn . . ." and then he remembered what Celeste had said about him being a father without children who would have them. It seemed suddenly, terribly right. These boys were to be his children! Still he fought the notion. "We can't keep them, Melana! They belong to their family—among their own kind . . ." He sighed, shaking his head again. "No, I can't . . . I just can't . . ."

"Not just you. Together *we* can! We're supposed to—I know we are! It's what we must do! You do feel it, don't you? I can sense you do!"

He *did* feel it—knew she was right. But he was also staggering beneath this incredible weight of unanticipated ties—the shackles of a lifetime of responsibility thrust upon him before he was ready for it—before he had even considered it. Parenting was a one-way door with no exits. He looked for reasons not to take them on.

"But why us? Don't you think it makes mores sense for them to grow up on Mhyrn? We . . . What are we supposed to do with them? They're Mhyrnian. They need to know their heritage—grow up beneath it. Isn't that what's best for them? We know next to nothing about Mhyrnian customs. Are we supposed to . . ."

"That's the scary part, Clement yes—all the things you're talking about. But there's more going on here than just raising two boys—I'm sure about that!

"Clement, I don't know how we're supposed to raise them any more than you do. But, somehow, we're supposed to do it. It sounds crazy, and all these things you mention are real concerns. But we can do it. We're both reasonably intelligent, aren't we? Together—both of us working together, we can do it. Can't we?

Reeber looked away, a deep sigh escaping him. He clamped his eyes shut, shaking his head.

"Look, I know what I'm going to say might sound like nonsense, Clement, but I feel that, well, this is supposed to be. If it's *supposed to be*, we'll get extra help from . . ." she spread her hands, "somewhere—someone—whoever it is that says to us 'raise these boys for a special purpose.' I don't know how it works. Some day we *will* know how it works, I think. But it *will* work out. We *will* know what to do when the time comes. Can't you feel it!" Melana took his hands, looking up into his eyes. "I can't believe you can't feel it." She sighed. "Am I sounding like an hysterical fool?" She gazed into his eyes and he knew he was lost. "You *do* feel it, don't you! It's right, isn't it!"

It did feel right, but Reeber could not shake the fear that gripped him. He shook his head

"Look!" Melana went on eagerly. "Can't you see that things could work out? When you

came in and talked to the boys . . . Why, Clement—that was the first time Kishkor had said anything since we lifted! No matter what I tried I couldn't get him talk to me, or even Oreb—and Oreb . . . well, he just sat there. He wouldn't cry—he wouldn't tantrum—nothing! He just sat. But you, Clement you did it—*you*. I was about at my wit's end. How did you know to come in when you did?"

Reeber didn't know, of course. He had just felt the need to seek her out. At the time guilt and a sense of duty seemed to be driving him, but now it seemed as if there was something more.

"Clement, I couldn't do anything more for them. It took *you* to do it!"

He felt a sudden, joyful surge of incandescent rightness within him—like the richness he had felt on the Vanguard and at times on Polyphemus.

"A day at a time?" He hugged her tightly. Her embrace was equally strong, and he felt her nodding yes. She sniffed once. When they pulled apart enough to look at each other again he saw that her eyes were moist.

"So we won't know what to do until the very moment we're supposed to do it, is that it?"

"Sometimes," she laughed, clearing the moisture off her cheeks and sniffing. "That was the sense I got from my dream."

"Well," Reeber sighed, resolved. "I might as well tell you the whole of it." He then proceeded to repeat what Celeste had told her about them.

"That's it, Clement! Isn't it?"

"That's it," he sighed, shaking his head in wonder.

"We're going to have two sons," she grinned with a *brightness* in her face Reeber had never seen there before. It made her incredibly beautiful—more beautiful than he had ever seen her before. "Oh, Clement—do you suppose the boys will want us as parents? And what about the legalities?"

"We'll leave it to them, of course. If they don't want us—well, I don't know. If it's *supposed* to be . . ."

"If it's supposed to be," Melana picked up. " . . . For some important purpose we keep sensing—if it's supposed to be, don't you think they will feel it too, Clement?"

Reeber nodded.

"And what about the legalities?"

"1 don't know about that one. Let's prepare to handle it and not try to get too anxious about it beforehand. Like you said, if it's supposed to be—it *will* happen—somehow, it will happen. I mean just look at all we've been through together. How is it that the Coss artifacts just happened to come to Coss who then gave them to me? And how is it we were able to keep them, even when Collins, with all his power, did everything he could to get them away from us? And now, here we are, nearing the time when Procyx is to be destroyed because we are taking the artifacts to wherever they need to be to work their power on it. And most of all—how is it that you and I ever found each other among all the trillions upon trillions of humans in the galaxy—how did we ever get together?"

Melana embraced him. They clung together for a long time—holding each other tightly—clinging onto each other as if once they parted they might never have each other again. Reeber pulled back just a bit, lifted her chin gently with his hand and kissed her.

* * *

Reeber stood in a quiet hallway of the Nebo, holding the Coss plate—studying it. The

notched arrowhead depression intrigued him. What was it for? There were no hieroglyphs inside the depression and he had discovered, quite by accident, that it was magnetized. Wait until he told his colleagues about that! Magnetic pluridium was unheard of. It seemed very likely that something else was supposed to fit within the depression—something metallic—perhaps even something else made of oppositely charged magnetic pluridium?

Reeber tried to understand where all of this business might be leading. It was like a puzzle. He reviewed what the puzzle pieces were as he saw them.

First, there was the unresolved mystery of what had happened when he had first demonstrated the Coss stone—that had hid the plate inside it—to Morse on board the courier ship. He recalled with excitement how the Vanguard Cygnus had burst into vivid, golden life when the stone had floated of itself in the air—a behavior that obviously startled everyone present.

Second, when Morse had tried to find out why the Cygnus had acted that way, he had been told by the Vanguard that it had understood the message—message?—but that it wasn't directed toward *it*. He would have to ask Morse more about that.

Third, when the Coss artifacts had finally been exposed to the pure tone of Procyx's appearance, the rock had melted away revealing this plate.

Fourth, the Sphere had created images that Reeber knew to be symbols of the twelve Vanguards.

Fifth, he had seen a thirteenth Vanguard—one of the three Lost Masters. It had to be!

Sixth, from all of this Reeber was sure that the Vanguards figured, somehow, in the destruction of Procyx. What that involvement was, he could not imagine—not yet.

And seventh, these Mhyrnian artifacts were vital to that destruction process as well. That, in itself, was a startling discovery. Mhyrn seemed clearly linked to the Vanguards as well as the other Mestrate legends and sciences. The conclusion was inescapable to Reeber.

He looked at the hieroglyphs on the plate and at those on the wall. They looked similar, probably written in the same language. Yes. Yes! He felt sure that the answers to all these questions could be found somewhere on this vessel.

Melana came down the corridor toward him. "Clement," she said and kissed him warmly. "Isn't all of this amazing? I mean look at it! I saw Celeste this morning. She told me some more about what some of the inscriptions intend for us. Clement—do you realize that we're the ones who will decipher all of this?" Then suddenly, her face grew excited. "Oh, Clement! Do you suppose *you're* the one who will do the translation?"

Reeber echoed his own burst of excitement at that thought. Yes, Maybe so! He looked carefully at the hieroglyphs, as if for the first time, and as he did, he deflated beneath an equally strong weight of discouragement. "They're so alien. I've never seen anything like them, not even among preserved originals millions of years old." He laughed without humor. "I'm not sure any individual could decipher them—certainly not without sophisticated computer assistance. Certainly not in any reasonable length of time, anyway."

Melana thought for a moment "Hmm. Perhaps you're right. Maybe you're not the one who's going to do the actual deciphering." She laughed. "I'm sure it won't be me."

"Who, then? Celeste?"

"Maybe. But she's only an intentor. I don't think she could translate."

"Morse?"

Melana shook her head. "He wants to get back to the Cygnus as soon as he can—told me that just a while ago." And then, her face dawned on something. He voice was eager. "Clement.

Aren't we forgetting someone?"

"Who? Polyphemus? There's certainly enough computer support there. I would guess one of the Vanguards could do it. But I don't see why the inscriptions would refer to *us*, when . . ."

"Us. Yes, Clement. Us. And who does *us* include, now?"

Reeber thought for only a moment before it dawned on him who Melana meant. "The boys!" Then it seemed preposterous. "You're not serious."

"Yes. Well, no. I mean, well, probably not now, anyway. But maybe in years to come—when they're older?"

Reeber thought about that for a moment then shrank beneath a stab of heavy, dark jealousy. Why *shouldn't* it be he that translated? He was best qualified, wasn't he? He knew the legends better than anyone on board. He looked down at Melana.

"That bothers you, doesn't it."

"What?" he asked defensively. "Er, no . . ."

"Clement. I know you. The prospect of translating these hieroglyphs must be incredibly exciting to you. Isn't it? Well isn't it?"

Reeber flushed. Curse her for being so close to him!

"It's all right! I understand," she hugged him. "You don't need to feel embarrassed about it."

"I'm *not* embarrassed about it . . ."

"*I'd* be jealous if I were you. This is what you've lived your life for, isn't it? To reveal the truth—no matter how it makes you feel or what it means to you?"

*No matter how it makes you feel or what it means to you*. The words hit Reeber hard, as if right in the solar plexus. Why should it hurt so much? He knew that Melana was right. He should be able to handle this, shouldn't he? Reeber remembered again how it felt finding out that there really were Vanguards. The joy of discovering that his childhood fantasy was, in fact, real had been so strong and sweet that it had been relatively easy for him to brush aside all his years of wasted research intending to prove they didn't exist. But this—*this*, to be denied *this* discovery! "I'm fine," Reeber pushed past her, heading down the hall.

"It's all right!" Melana called after him. "There will be plenty for us to share with them . . ."

Reeber had no particular place in mind to go, so he found himself simply wandering among the corridors. After a time he paused, struggling with himself. How *could* he reconcile what he wanted to do and what he suspected, now, to be his true role. Melana *had* put her finger on it. He *would* be denied the wonder of translation. The *boys* would do the translating. Of course!

Melana had not followed him, and just in case she had such plans, he moved away quickly, moving farther down the halls with deliberate aimlessness. He needed to sort this out *himself*.

He walked for a time, just walked among the hallways of the ship, wrestling with himself while simultaneously trying to deny and embrace what he knew to be the truth.

He had no peace.

Had the makers of the Vanguards—of this very vessel *truly* conversed with Deity in their construction, as the legends had so firmly proclaimed? Is that what all this turmoil was about? Is that what had brought him and Melana together, to be parents to the children who would finally restore all the ancient, lost truths to humanity spread across the galaxy? Was that all? Were all these years spent in academic training and exercise preparing him only to be a parent? Was the honored Doctor Clement Reeber now a mere parent to someone else who was, obviously, greater—more favored, more talented? Was he a lesser father to someone who would get to do

what Reeber desperately wanted while he stood silently aside and watched? Did he exist only to help prepare those someones for such work and then spend his strength merely encouraging them along once the work had begun?

Reeber scowled. Here he was—Clement Reeber, expert of Dawn Era legends and antiquities, recognized authority on Vanguard mythology, denied the opportunity of a lifetime—the opportunity of centuries of research and discovery! It was more than Reeber could bear. It wasn't fair! It wasn't right!

"Curse it all to Gates!" he hissed and then, as if in defiance, he stopped wandering and stood, gazing at the inscriptions in the hall where he found himself. He would show up whoever or whatever made such callused choices about people's lives. He would show Him that he could translate!

The figures were odd looking. Many seemed truly alien. He looked for some symbol—*any* symbolism he might recognize to serve as a touchstone. He studied them intently, trying to force himself to see their meaning. After a time, Reeber wondered if anyone, even supported by the Gelding Mark VIII, could *ever* fully decipher these characters. Surely they must contain some intellectually challenging philosophies; scientific equations or advanced concepts. Even translated, the things written here might baffle even the most academically gifted minds. After all, these things had been written by the most technologically advanced civilization ever to exist in this universe.

He wondered at the figures. He decided that once he could distinguish such things as equations from things like histories or philosophies or whatever, he should surely be able to build excellent theories about what the builders of the Vanguards and this vessel knew and believed about the universe. He could then look for evidence to support his conclusions. Anything that didn't fit he could chalk up to a mystery that one really shouldn't be worried about right now. After all, it would certainly be cleared up once all the evidence was in and his theory proved.

"Let's look for numbers, first," he said to himself. Since the numbers on the Coss sphere had been identified as binary expressions, he *should* be able to find any numbers here expressed the same way. He scanned for numbers. "Ah, there's a nice series." The sequence seemed to preface a grouping of hieroglyphs. Then there was a space and another sequence of numbers. He nodded, smiling. The numbers appeared to be articles or references. But to what? He tried studying a single block of characters. No numbers there. The hieroglyphs seemed to be true a cross between pictographs and symboids. They looked closest to very ancient Mhyrnian figures he had seen once. There were suggestions of pictures, but each picture-figure was layered in meanings. This language appeared to be very early, layering structures much akin to the classical symboid discipline. But he could not follow it in the anything but the simplest understandings. The deeper constructions were utterly mysterious.

"Ah, here we are," Reeber smiled. "Now, these looks like . . . humans; water; fire; animals; plants and . . . yes, perhaps change—revolution? A lot of change. Sunlight . . . change . . . life? Hmm," he mused. "What might . . . perhaps a formula for changing life, somehow? Or perhaps a whole world filled with life . . . or to *be* filled with life? Terra-forming? Yes! Yes, it could be!" There were obvious pairings of animals—predator and prey. There were plants of all kinds represented, perhaps suggesting what appeared to be a cycle? It *could* be that these were methods for the construction of a planet's seasons—the formula for the making of a balanced biosphere.

Reeber shook his head. Too many multiple symboid levels here. "I don't know." He shook his head again. "Hmm." He would have to have a computer to sort them all out.

Suddenly but quietly, Celeste came around the corner of the hallway, apparently not

seeing Reeber for the moment. She was caught up in absolute concentration, carefully searching the intent of the inscriptions. Uneasy, Reeber felt a sudden urge to leave before she saw him. But it was too late. Her eyes turned to him.

"Don't go, Clement. You aren't disturbing me."

"I . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Reeber said defensively. "I was just trying my hand at translating a bit, that's all. What about you? What have you found?"

"Oh, Clement! This is amazing, this last sequence of writings I've been following! Oh, I know I can't see the words, but the intentions here are marvelous. Sometimes, I can almost see things. Here, for instance. Let me tell you one. Now, look at this row of characters. "I see . . . I see a man dressed in white . . . no. No, it is red. It's both, actually."

Reeber watched Celeste's face as her eyes moved across the figures. Amazingly, it seemed almost as if her face glowed with some sort of inner light. He shook the thought aside.

"The man . . . shines with brilliance, brighter than the sun. He stands . . . in water. He is coming up out of the water—wet. All around him trees bloom with dazzling blossoms. Animals come toward him, predator and prey alike, walking together peacefully . . . no. More in harmony." She paused, searching. "White flowers float about him on the water. And now, out of the waters . . . yes, out of the waters around him I see men, women and children coming up from beneath the surface. They . . . they come to him . . . they're drawn to him as well. All are dressed in red. The color . . . the color drains away as they touch him, leaving their robes white.

"His eyes are like fire, Clement! His hair is whiter than anything I have ever seen! His voice is like the rush of winds or the roar of cascading waters." She turned on Reeber suddenly. "Clement, that is what is contained in these words here. Can you feel the power of this vessel? Part of that power is stored here, in these very inscriptions. I believe that no evil thing could ever bear to come too close!"

Reeber was devastated. Never—*never* would he have supposed that such intent resided within in these hieroglyphs. How could this be? Every one of his colleagues and even he, himself, would quickly have dismissed even the suggestion of any such content—too mystical; too superstitious; too *simple minded* for such a technologically advanced civilization as the one that could build vessels like these! And yet all this had a *familiar* sound to it. Familiar, yes—but familiar from where? It almost felt like going home—the truest home he could ever imagine. Reeber felt an intense *burning* of rightness within him at the images Celeste had spoken. It was like a brilliant light burning within him—a burning of rightness mingled with a deep, steadying peace. And there was joy—joy, at long last, joy again!

At last Reeber understood the wisdom of his role. It was not wisdom born of intellectual reasoning or mere academic logic. It was wisdom that seemed far better, if that were possible. It seemed wonderfully correct. Reeber accepted that there *were* times when such wisdom as this was right. He could not explain it. Perhaps this intangible acceptance was like an instinct akin to the Mestrate gifts. Perhaps it was inspiration from some higher source. Whatever it was it provided Reeber with a *knowledge* that now was one of those times when traditional wisdom would have to stare in disbelief. No mere scientific method could uncover the things that were stored in these figures. A more elusive, *intangible* approach was needed; a method utilizing both techniques and valued behaviors beyond anything imagined by present day science.

Reeber knew this, and now he could see how that it would be far better that children approached this work—children gifted in translation; children having fresh, uncluttered minds;

children who could work with no preconceptions to overcome. In the end, they might be the *only* ones who could uncover the wonders that were hidden here, for they would be fearless in revealing what they found.

Reeber had been kindly, gently shown this. Celeste had given him a taste of what was written here: pure, incredible; astounding truths that could well confound the wisest of men, or serve to free the weakest of children from oppression. Here were wonders to lift the humble and submissive to unimaginable heights.

What those truths would mean to humanity! Clement Reeber would find it very hard wait for them.

## I I

Thunder cracked and rebounded across the valley. The steady roar of the heavy rains seemed all the more intense when it had subsided. Palmer jerked awake, his gutted helmet rolling out of his lap onto the damp ground. He glanced around him intently then cursed himself for dropping off to sleep.

RoseStar blistered the southern horizon—a milky bubble surrounded by smoke plumes wafting from the distant wreckages of outlaw combine ships Gaultor had destroyed. Also to the south and east of RoseStar the ugly scar of a crater marked the ferryship's doom, and somewhere in the jungles surrounding the dead city there waited the ruined ferryship's fully-equipped and still functional hoversleds. Had Palmer's biotranz still been working he could have brought them here at any time. Now, all he had to work with was his helmet, and he had spent more than a few cursing hours trying to rig a transmitter strong enough to trigger the hoversleds into life again. So far, nothing.

Palmer shivered, even though the temperature was moderate. He had no blaster—no energy weapons of any kind. He had fashioned a battle staff out of a long, hard stem he had found among the exotic fauna of Mhyrn. This he grasped more securely as his eyes watched—his ears listened, trying to discern any approach. He could have no idea how long he had slept. If the outlaws had managed to land a ship after Gaultor's destruction of the fleet, they might have crept up on him and be, even now, waiting beyond the vegetation that clustered so heavily all around him. The only way Palmer could be sure was to go into the Kyrellian battle stance. He had avoided that since his fighter had crashed. The physical and emotional discipline of the stance required considerable energy, and Palmer was hovering just above exhaustion, as it was.

Still, he had better make sure.

He took only a moment of total sensory introspection, then turned it powerfully outward. In that moment he became aware of every leaf around him—every bird—every insect—every animal—where it stood or hovered or hid. Fortunately, mercifully, there was nothing human nearby. He relaxed and slumped to the ground, fighting to keep his eyes open—struggling to stay awake.

Gaultor shifted, a suppressed moan escaping him. Palmer was instantly awake. He turned and went over to him.

The large Mhyrnian lay propped against two trees that had grown up so close to each other their trunks nearly touched. Gaultor's hands were wrapped in leaves. His face was pink, the skin beginning to peel from first-degree burns. Palmer touched his forehead. It was hot.

Despite all of Palmer's precautions, Gaultor's hands must have become infected. Palmer knelt beside him and carefully removed the leaf coverings on one hand. There were huge blisters all over it, pink and oozing—puffy.

"Great" Palmer whispered. Gaultor stirred, looking up at him.

"My hands are feverish," Gaultor said, coughing once. He must have picked up a cold along with the infection in his hands.

"Yes," Palmer said evenly. "We should really be debreeding the burns, but I don't have the tools . . ."

"It is the wages of the Golden Death," Gaultor said. "One cannot channel such immeasurable powers without them affecting him. The Golden Death is thus named for two reasons."

"We must get you help," Palmer said, picking new leaves and gently wrapping the hands again.

Gaultor sat silently. Twice he winced from what must have been excruciating pain, but he did nothing more. When Palmer had finished he saw Gaultor looking up at the mountain Markeeome.

"We must go up," Gaultor said, but not moving.

"First, we must get help . . ."

"No!" Gaultor's voice was suddenly strong. "We must obtain the Key before anyone finds us."

"Key? What . . ."

"The Key that will empower the most sacred objects allowing us, in their time, to open the heavens to us that we might destroy Procyx."

"Oh. Look, Gaultor, you are in no condition . . ."

"I know what I must do." The Mhyrnian continued to rest calmly. He smiled after a moment. "I see it so clearly now—how an Infidel could possibly serve the purposes of the Great God." Now he looked directly at Palmer. "Martin—you have seen that I have the power to heal, yet I cannot turn those powers upon myself. They must be applied to me by another, so possessing."

"What? You mean another Most High Nobleman?"

"Yes."

"Can we find one? How . . ."

"I speak of you, my friend," Gaultor smiled.

"Me?" Palmer started, backing off. "But I'm not . . ."

"I have but to confer those powers upon you and you can heal me."

"Surely, here on Mhyrn we could find another . . ."

"There are no others. I am the last—the last, that is, until I confer the powers upon you. Then there shall be two Most High Noblemen to the god Zorl—one a true believer from birth—a holy man," Gaultor's eyes seemed to look off at something remote and then see something clearly as if for the first time. " . . . And the other a stranger—an offworlder—an Infidel."

"But . . ." Palmer stuttered. " . . . But I can't! I'm . . ."

"I will not force it upon you."

"Gaultor, I want you to be healed. I know that you can heal, what with Lenore Aramus . . . I just don't know that *I* could ever . . ."

"I say again, I will not force it upon you," Gaultor gazed without judgement at Palmer. "But," he looked up at Markeeome once more. "We must go up into the mountain, in any event."

"You're in no condition . . ."

"I said we must go!" Gaultor's eyes suddenly flashed with glints of that golden energy Palmer had seen before, energies the Mhyrnian had used to bring down a hundred powerful star vessels and burning his own hands in the process. Palmer nodded without hesitation, leaning down to help the Most High Nobleman rise to his feet.

"I can only hope that I might be healed up there," he turned to Palmer, gazing into his eyes. "But it is not to be expected, when the means for my healing can be had here and now."

"I *want* to help, Gaultor. Really I want to."

Gaultor softened. "I know you do, Martin. Forgive my persistence. Now, let us climb to the left. I believe that the road of the gods is beyond that second hill there, behind that outcropping of table trees. It will be an easier climb up the mountain if we can find the road."

Palmer moved his shoulder up beneath Gaultor's armpit. He used the staff to balance himself. Gaultor walked with him, holding his burned hands upward—carefully trying to avoid touching anything with them.

The foliage here was particularly thick. Tangling underbrush slowed their progress to a fraction of what it might have been out in the open. Palmer carried the burden of keeping them going. Twice, as they made their way up the first ridge, Gaultor nearly passed out. They fell repeatedly, Gaultor instinctively putting his hands out to stay the fall and succeeding only in opening the blisters on his hands or tearing at the sensitive, disintegrating, burned flesh. When they paused to rest at the top of the first hill, Palmer took the time to inspect Gaultor's hands again. The leaf coverings had long fallen off. There was dirt and grime all over the blisters and blood trickled from more than one freshly gouged wound. Several of the larger blisters had been ruptured, the skin shriveled up over them again. This was not going to work.

"Beyond that hill, Martin. The road leads to the shrine of Ambylor where the sacred artifacts were once hidden. The Key should still be concealed within it. The Key shall open all possibilities unto us. Let us hurry."

Palmer shifted his weight beneath Gaultor again. The trip down was easier, but more treacherous. The ground was muddy and slippery. Palmer watched carefully where he placed each step—looking for rocks protruding from the soil or rough, dead tree trunks. Amazingly, there were no falls here. Palmer was taking more time to move. They rested at the gully for nearly an hour. The rain continued steadily, and it was getting dark. Not good news, for while Gaultor and Palmer needed rest, another night in the wet would only worsen the Mhyrnian's infections. They needed shelter, at the least—a fire and blankets. Even with those necessities, Gaultor would most likely worsen.

"I think we should try to reach the top before dark," Palmer said, climbing stiffly to his feet. "This a perfect place for a flash river. You ready, Gaultor?"

The Mhyrnian did not answer. It took him three attempts for him to rise to his feet again. Palmer shifted shoulders this time, shoring Gaultor up as they climbed the hill. Three falls later he shifted back to the other side.

Between the unavoidable grunts of climbing, Palmer heard Gaultor trying to sing, of all things. He decided not ask Gaultor what he was doing and pressed forward. The words were mere mumbles; the tones squeaking mockeries of what they should have been. But as they continued to climb, Palmer felt a lifting of his spirits. He was gaining his second wind.

The climb went faster now. Palmer had found a system and moved with a steady tread. Gaultor's singing had become stronger as well, and Palmer could discern a melody. After a while, he found himself humming along—following, however haltingly, the song Gaultor was trying to

sing. His strength seemed to grow even stronger. At last they crested the hill.

Below them, a three-meter wide trough made of carefully fitted stone blocks cut into the jungle. While ferns and vines grew up between the cracks, it was immeasurably more attractive a path than the one they had just blazed. The roadway disappeared out into the valley beneath the trees while just below them it began angling upward into the mountain, also losing itself in the vegetation.

"It is the road of the gods," Gaultor said, his voice gravelly. "It leads to the shrine of Ambylor."

"Where the Key is kept?"

"Yes. Let us hasten."

Palmer shouldered Gaultor again and moved with frustrating care down the hill. This slope was steeper than the one coming up so they had to be especially careful. Even though this was the last leg of their trek to the road, it was the hardest. The hours of difficult exertion were again taking their toll. Gaultor had stopped singing and merely grunted and puffed with each difficult, descending step. Palmer felt his second wind slipping away so fast that he wondered, at the end of each step, if he could possibly go on like this. He took to looking ahead at the landscape—finding a tree and saying to himself that if he could just reach that tree he would stop, and they didn't need to go any further.

"This isn't going to work," Gaultor said finally amidst gasps. "Why will you not heal me?" he asked, his voice near pleading. "We cannot die here, or all will be lost! I cannot see why . . ."

Suddenly Gaultor toppled to the ground, unconscious. His left hand glanced across a jagged outcropping of rock, breaking new blisters and tearing a large swath of skin off. Blood poured from the wound.

Palmer fell to his knees in despair, his staff dropping and sliding down the mud into the darkening shadows.

"I can't anymore . . ." Palmer sobbed at the rain. "It's just too much . . . I can't . . ."

Thunder broke over his head. Palmer sat back on his heels not caring any longer. He refused to look at Gaultor—refused to care about his bloated, ugly hands—refused to care about the galaxy any longer. "Let it come," he hissed angrily at the clouds. "Come on, destroy us all! Ruin the planet. Damn everything!!"

After a time, he gently took Gaultor's blood drenched hand, carefully replaced the hanging skin over the wound and choosing leaves from a nearby tree, wrapped each hand in them, squeezing at the tear to try to stop the bleeding.

Hours passed. Gaultor slept, delirious. His fever rose higher and the rain continued to fall. Palmer dragged the Mhyrnian under a low table tree, gaining a measure of shelter, but there was still no blankets—no fire—no antibiotics, let alone rejuv projectors. Palmer seriously considered leaving Gaultor and trying to find the hoversleds on his own—on foot, but he knew that RoseStar must be at least fifty kilometers away through dense jungle and who could guess what other dangers. He unclipped the helmet from his belt and tried again to get some sort of response from its transmitters, but found the fuel cells utterly empty. They were dead.

Gaultor mumbled something in Mhyrnese. Palmer listened. He sat beside the Mhyrnian, his legs huddled up against his chest. And now he cursed himself for not taking Gaultor's advice while the shaman was still coherent enough to pass on the power of the Golden Death. He had witnessed its healing power when Lenore's sight had been restored and when he and Cosgrove had been freed of the biotranz grip of the outlaw combine woman. Lightning flashed. Palmer looked at Gaultor—ragged, pale, sweating and shivering all at once—his hands disfigured.

Palmer wondered what he must look like and then laughed once. What a sight they must be—The Ones, as Gaultor had said, whatever that meant.

Another barrage of lightning taunted a false moment of daylight but withheld its thunder. Gaultor's eyes opened suddenly. He turned to look at Palmer, and Palmer immediately sensed coherence behind those eyes. Gaultor was lucid. But for how long?

"I'll do it," Palmer said quickly. "Give me those powers and tell me what to do to heal you."

Gaultor squinted at him for a moment, then smiling faintly he spoke. "It is well. Give me your hands." More lightning blinked free of thunder. Palmer reached his dirty hands out toward the Mhyrnian. Gaultor reached up and took them in his own. The movement started them bleeding again. Palmer felt the sickening, soft puffiness of the blisters in Gaultor's palms squeeze against his own. The shaman struggled for a moment beneath the pain. His grip increased until it was firm and strong. A moment later he began to speak quiet words in Mhyrnese.

For nearly five minutes the words continued. Somehow, Palmer expected to feel some tangible energy in his hands—perhaps something even visceral from the bestowal of such powers, but there was nothing. Palmer went on, listening only halfway to what Gaultor said until it dawned on him the Mhyrnian was suddenly speaking in Interworld again.

" . . . And you shall found worlds and nations. From you and your children shall come The Two Brothers—the Warriors of Light, who shall finally destroy the great evil, Echion, in the due days of the Creator. And I say unto you that the hour is nearly come that a man shall come to you from the far heavens—even the highest heavens of this order and give unto you a sacred robe. You are to wear this robe always, until Procyx is destroyed, and as long as you do, no evil can overcome you—no not even the evil of a terrible one from the Dawn Era. Now rejoice, Martin, for the end of the days of grief is truly at hand—even at the doors. These things are true, and I say them as one who has authority to say them. Be it so."

Gaultor released Palmer's hands. He waited in the darkness—in silence. Finally he spoke to Gaultor.

"Well?"

"You will know what to do, Martin. As I have said at other times, do not doubt or try to reason. Just do it."

Palmer shook his head, still not understanding. He could hear Gaultor settling back and soon the Mhyrnian fell into unconsciousness again.

Palmer stood up in the darkness, beneath the rain. "All right," he said after a time. "What am I to do? How do I . . ." and then, suddenly, in his mind he saw himself pouring water over Gaultor's hands from his helmet. Palmer shook his head, but the image persisted. "Seven times . . ." he said, as if repeating something he both heard and did not hear, but knew to be right. "I pour water on Gaultor's hands seven times—from my helmet."

Palmer found himself disappointed. Somehow, he had expected some magical, golden sparkles to come from his hands that would heal Gaultor instantly, just as he had seen when Gaultor had freed them from the tranz captivity of the combine woman. But apparently, that was not what was to happen here. Sighing, Palmer took his helmet and holding it upside down began catching rainwater in it.

It took a while before there was enough to pour. Then, quietly—solemnly, Palmer poured the water over Gaultor's hands. Reason screamed suddenly into his mind that getting them wet with contaminated water was the worst thing he could have done. Blindly following Gaultor's directions, he ignored reason and waited for more water to gather for the second dispensation.

He listened to the whisper of the rain in the darkness. The thunder had settled down and

there was only the sound of the rain. No, there was something else—the sound of water pouring as if from a drainpipe. Palmer listened carefully, stood and turned, trying to locate it. Abruptly his helmet swung under it and within a few seconds, it was full of water. He knelt again and poured the water from the trees above onto the hands of the unconscious Gaultor a second time. Within just a few minutes, he had poured the dirty water from the trees over the burned and infected hands seven times.

Palmer waited. Gaultor did not stir. Palmer could just barely see him in the darkness.

Then, suddenly, the rain stopped.

Palmer sighed in relief. He moved carefully under the tree beside Gaultor and felt his forehead. It was cool, and the Mhyrnian's breathing was now that of the soft flow of deep sleep. His fever had broken!

"Yes!" Palmer whispered beneath the first hope that the Mhyrnian was healing—somehow—impossibly, he was healing! His heart surged with gratitude and excitement. Though his clothes were soaked, his skin wet, the air was amazingly pleasant and dry. He leaned back against the tree on the opposite side of Gaultor and looked out over the road of the gods as it disappeared down the foothills of Markeeome into the valley below.

The clouds were beginning to break. Palmer saw his first star only a few minutes later and then, shining ever brighter through the thinning clouds grew a rich blue glow that moments later pierced the overcast. Procyx poured its brilliance across the jungle. Palmer watched it for a time and then, turning away, he saw it.

There was a trace of the dirty water he had poured over Gaultor's hands remaining, pooled in his helmet, lying on the ground where he had left it. The water glowed with a soft, inner, amber light—as if it were molten gold. Palmer bowed his head, his eyes stinging from gratitude to whatever god it was that had a name so sacred that it could not be spoken—a god that had bestowed power on an Infidel named Martin Palmer.

Sleep took him at last.

* * *

Palmer woke to the sounds of the Mhyrnian jungle. He lay on flat, smooth stone—polished like marble. He felt surprisingly warm and nearly dry and the smell of cooking meat made his mouth water. He opened his eyes to see Gaultor, his back to him, working over a fire.

"Gaultor?"

"Come and eat, my brother," Gaultor replied, holding up a cooked bird's carcass impaled on a spick.

"Your hands . . ." Palmer rose to his feet. He was stiff, but eager to see how Gaultor was. He moved quickly around and saw the Mhyrnian's hands a little pink, but otherwise completely normal.

"I thank you for healing me," Gaultor said. His face was free of any peeling or hints of even first-degree burns. His voice was utterly clear of congestion. He looked down into the fire. "But then I should have known that the Creator would provide for us. My time has not yet come and we must both be preserved. Now, eat."

Palmer was voracious. He had downed nearly half the bird before he remembered that Gaultor might want some.

"Have it all," Gaultor smiled. "I have begun my fast."

"A fast? Is that wise? Surely you must still feel weak from your illness."

"I am renewed—and I have eaten. Much. Three times I slept and three times I awoke to hunt for food and to eat."

Palmer looked around him. Only now did he really notice that they were in the trough—on the road of the gods. "How did we . . ."

" . . . Come here? I awoke a day ago and carried you here. You have slept since then until now."

"I slept a whole day? You should have wakened me—I could've helped you hunt—and the outlaw combines! Who knows . . ."

"I have only seen two more of their fighters making a surveillance flight. Since then, nothing else. Thank you for your care, but you needed your rest more than food. Now satisfy your hunger. It is well," Gaultor stood, looking up the road as it went on under the shadows of the jungle, higher up into the mountain. "Our quest truly begins here, and we are both well, fed and rested." He turned just as Palmer finished tearing and chewing the last of the cooked meat from the remaining leg.

"I am thirsty," Palmer said, standing. He laughed. "You'd think after all that rain we could find some water about."

Gaultor smiled again. "Up the road away we will find basins for drinking. They are imbedded in the walls every so often to refresh the pilgrim. You may have my share. If you are ready, let us begin."

Palmer took the time to take care of his bodily functions, then returned to the road. Gaultor stood looking—staring up into its shadows.

"The combine people may be back," Palmer said turning a wary gaze to the sky.

"The road ahead will soon disappear beneath the forest," Gaultor began walking as Palmer joined him. "And that is good, for it will help conceal us from such unworthy eyes."

Palmer nodded but knew otherwise. Without their being equipped with infrared liars, the combine ships could find them if they were determined enough. Still, being out of normal visual sight was always preferable, and they needed every bit of help and luck they could get. He followed Gaultor up the road.

The trees covered them over. It was like a great canopy of green, softening the light overhead. Gaultor led the way—energetic, obviously anxious to be at the end of the road rather than where they were. Here, his height served him well, for his strides were significantly longer than Palmer's, making him have to quicken his pace from time to time to keep up.

What was most amazing about the road of the gods was that it was perfectly straight. So often roads leading up into mountains wound and twisted at the mercy of the geography. Here the narrow path was straight with a slowly increasing incline. By midday it must have been a good twelve degrees.

Palmer was in excellent shape, but working to keep up with Gaultor proved ever more tiring. At last Palmer sighted one of the drinking basins the Mhyrnian had told him about. He used the opportunity to rest as well as to drink.

The water was pure, somehow. There was a slight turbulence when Palmer dropped his face into it to drink. The basin did not appear to have caught the rain that had fallen two days earlier. Gaultor stood behind him and as if reading his thoughts said, "The basins are fed by springs. The water here is the purest you will ever find on Mhyrn." Palmer dropped his face to quench his thirst again, and again. When at last he felt satiated, he wiped his chin and watched Gaultor reading hieroglyphs on the wall.

"The shrine," he said, looking up the road again, eager. "We should be able to reach it by

nightfall if we move on quickly."

Palmer started up the road without a word and Gaultor soon overtook him.

Through breaks in the trees, Palmer could see the real majesty of Markeeome growing ever grander above them. Its peaks were lost in clouds and snow covered the higher slopes. The vegetation changed gradually. The air grew thinner. The incline of the road stabilized to consistently twelve to fifteen degrees. Occasionally they came to sections of steps. On occasion the road turned into a long stairway that could cause even the fittest to faint. Palmer guessed that the first such section of steps must have gone up thirty stories. Later, they encountered a seventy-story staircase. Both he and Gaultor rested twice on this latter ascent since each of the steps was one and one-half times higher than normal. Amazingly, when they reached the top, the road began again and was perfectly level, again disappearing into the trees.

The air was cooler. A different species of table trees interspersed themselves with those of lower elevations, and all about were other kinds of shrubs and short trees that looked like pines. Their fragrance wasn't quite right, nor their shape—too spherical—but the needle-like leaves—dark green seemed to herald their entrance into a pine forest.

Here the road flared outward, the walls slanting down and disappearing into the ground as if burying themselves. A large, circular clearing opened before Palmer and Gaultor at its center. Palmer jolted, for he recognized this terrain and impressive, ornate structure of stone from the RNA implant he had gained back on Ahrgol.

"The shrine of Ambylor," he said and Gaultor, a few steps ahead, stopped suddenly, turning on him.

"It is. But how did you know that?"

"I've studied some about Procyx and your prophecies . . ."

Palmer felt a sudden flush of panic. Intellectually, he recognized what was happening to him. The RNA implant began flashing stabs of its alternate reality within him. Beyond his control he was completely immersed in it. He was Ambylor again, walking up to the shrine; worrying about the prophecies; kneeling to pray; confronting his son and the hunters again; shaming all into repentance—all but his son . . .

Palmer felt someone tugging at him—shouting at him from some other world . . .

He knelt before the shrine, felt the burning stab of his own son's sword and fell flat on his face and then . . .

Then, abruptly, Palmer found himself surrounded by a brilliant, glowing gold. Paralyzed, he felt himself turned over and saw above him, not his son, but another of the Most High Noblemen. Gentle hands reached forward, covering his eyes. The golden brilliance flared into dazzling power then fell away . . . and Martin Palmer found himself beneath the shadow of the shrine, on his back, gazing up into Gaultor's face.

"Another bewitching?" Gaultor asked with a soothing reassuring smile, helping him sit up. Palmer was covered in sweat, his heart racing.

"You might say that," he caught his breath. "It was an artificial implanted simulation of the martyrdom of Ambylor."

Gaultor gazed at him briefly, then shook his head. "It cannot have been artificial. There was enchantment laced throughout its fabric."

"But a machine produced it."

"Look," Gaultor helped Palmer to his feet.

The shrine stood open, just as Palmer had opened it as Ambylor in the simulacron. Inside knelt the solitary figure in its posture of reverence, and on either side stood the empty cradles

where the stone and sphere should have been.

"The Key is gone as well as the instruments," Gaultor said sadly. "I don't know what I should do, Martin! The Key should yet be hidden here! The shrine has remained closed since the death of Ambylor. My great, great grandfather closed it secretly after the martyrdom, and it could not have been opened since that time. We all assumed that the Key remained in its most secret hiding place. But it is gone. I cannot understand it! And how is it that you knew how to open the shrine? Martin—I fear for the fate of the Key. You see, only my ancestral line of the Most High Noblemen to Zorl has remained. Only *I* should have been able to open the shrine. But it opened now, beneath *your* touch. It is impossible! Of course, you too are such a one now—one of the Most High Noblemen. But even so, I have not told you the secrets. Yet you spoke the sacred words with exactness—you touched the stones in their proper order."

Palmer was confused.

"I cannot understand!" Gaultor paced uneasily. "Those secrets can be had only by the Most High Noblemen! No one outside of the order could know them . . . unless," Gaultor peered carefully into the shrine. "Unless agents of the Evil One have created this enchanted record of yours in order to preserve it against the day when *they* might want to plunder the instruments. But no, the instruments were gone when Ambylor came to the shrine." Gaultor halted suddenly, turning to peer back into the shrine again. "Or were they?" He turned quickly to Palmer again. "And what of the Key in your record?

"The records of the Martyrdom say that when Ambylor came to this place the artifacts were not here. My fathers have assumed that the Key, hidden more carefully and beneath a strong, protecting power, remained here, undisturbed—awaiting this day. But now, I do not know . . . It may be that that is not true."

"How *can* we know?"

"You are one who sees, Martin. And now you are a Most High Nobleman, as well. Call up those gifts and see what really happened when Ambylor opened the shrine."

Palmer took a deep breath. He bowed his head in reverence—seeking the powers of a Most High Nobleman, as he had done before washing Gaultor's hands seven times from his helmet.

After a breath, he looked up. Before, when the RNA implant had overwhelmed him, Palmer had seen things through the eyes of Ambylor—a fabricated, yet supposedly *accurate* Ambylor. Now he became an eyewitness—a seer, looking back across the centuries at a sight that none but the real Ambylor could have seen.

The great Mhyrnian martyr knelt before the shrine, speaking words the watching Palmer now understood. He touched the stones in the same order Palmer had done when he had thought he was Ambylor in the simulacron. The shrine opened. Palmer stepped up close behind Ambylor, gazing over his shoulder inside. Within it, resting in their cradles, was a slab of igneous stone and a sphere of solid pluridium with a blue, star shaped jewel embedded in its top. Ambylor placed his hands upon the kneeling figure that rested between the artifacts and bowing his head slid the figure carefully aside. A second, hidden chamber opened before him. Ambylor and Palmer peered into it. Ambylor's face burst into astonishment.

"No!" Ambylor shook his head, incredulous. "The sacred instruments are here but the Key—the Key is gone! This is surely the dawning of the days of grief. Oh, Great God whose name is too holy to be spoken—I beseech Thee; if I am he who is to be slain, how then, without the Key, shall the great powers be awakened when the Eye of Echion shall pour down death upon so many worlds? Who are the Holy Man and the Infidel? And how shall these sacred instruments be protected, that they be not removed as well? Wilt Thou have mercy upon thy children across

all stars and throughout all heavens? I pray Thee, preserve and restore the sacred means of destroying the End Star of Grief. Please . . . Father! I shall go to my death, as Thou hast proscribed—but please preserve Thy children—all of them—holy and Infidel alike! What can I do that Thou mayest have such mercy?"

Ambylor flattened himself upon the ground in a prayer so fervent that Palmer could feel its power even now, across three and a half centuries. For nearly a minute Ambylor supplicated his God.

"Ambylor," a quiet voice spoke to the soon to be martyr. Ambylor lifted his head and, together with Palmer, turned to face a man hooded, plain and soft spoken, standing in silhouette against the sunset. He wore a dark, thick cloak. His long, white beard was braided and wrapped around his shoulders like a scarf. After a moment, a quiet canyon wind caught a furrow of his clothing, rustling it softly.

"You have been heard. I come in service to the great plan. Be calm. The Key is safe. But the time has come to remove the sacred instruments also unto a safe place. Give them unto me. I will take them whither I am commanded. But know this, and hear this promise. They shall fall into the hands of a chosen courier—one who shall be raised up to protect and deliver them unto the Holy Man and the Infidel in the due time of wisdom. He that shall bring them shall begin the days of joy, preparatory to the coming of the End Star of Joy before there shall be, for each of us, a new heaven. He that shall bring them shall give to all the children of the stars the most plain and precious treasures and words, hidden from men since the beginning of the times of darkness. And these great treasures shall never again be completely hidden away, until the days of the End Star of Joy are fulfilled."

Ambylor bowed his head in silent thanks, and then rising to his feet he reached inside the shrine and carefully removed the artifacts. He began to give them to the man when he hesitated.

"What is it?" the hooded figure asked him.

"Be not angry with me," Ambylor said, holding the objects back, close to him. "But how shall I know that you are a holy one and not an angel of the Liar, Echion?"

"I am of the order of the Holy Noblemen to the Great God. Shall not my robes prove my right?"

Ambylor thought for a moment. "They should. But the Liar has great black witcheries and priestcrafts—and he is a master of the sciences, and can do many great deceptions."

"Is it not written that the robes that reveal the self—even the Armor of Righteousness can neither be overcome nor controlled, even by the most powerful of the Black Arts?"

"It is so written."

"And you wish to see that, as a Most High Nobleman to the Great God, I wear the Armor of Righteousness?"

"Be not angry with me. I fear I must so ask, for I am but the last of them that are to guard the artifacts and I must do so with all the caution and wisdom I possess. You have asked me to give them to you, and I know you not, though you seem familiar to me."

"Very well. Replace the artifacts within the safety of the shrine and close them up against the Black Arts. Then, summon up and clothe yourself within the powers of the Golden Death, against which no witchery of evil can stand, and then face me. If I am a true brother, there shall be only joy between us. If I am a liar, then I shall perish before you, as shall all who uphold the works of the Great Liar."

Ambylor nodded. He put the artifacts back, closed the shrine and, standing for a moment, his back to the man, surrounded himself in the golden glories that Palmer had seen surrounding

Gaultor. When those brilliances shone with incredible radiance Ambylor turned again to face the man who now had opened his cloak.

Palmer looked at the robe as well and staggered under its power. There was, here, every sweet recollection, every noble delight, every pure beauty Palmer had ever experienced or dreamed, or yearned or imagined—and more. It extended past thought and reason and reached beyond into realms impossibly wondrous—not capable of being imagined by any finite human. And yet this was familiar somehow, and Palmer felt the pure and potent love of The True Home calling to him from it. It held him so firmly that only at the man's closing of his cloak did any sense of what Palmer was supposed to be doing consciously return to him. He cleared the moisture from his eyes and saw Ambylor, yet surrounded in dancing, golden halos, down upon his knees before the man as if to worship him.

"Stand, brother. I am but a servant, as you. Now that you have beheld my armor, what do you wish to do?"

"I know that you are a true servant of the plan, now" Ambylor went to the shrine, opening it again and removing the artifacts. He stepped forward and placed them in the man's hands. "And I go to my end with some measure of hope." The Golden Death fell dark. "Now tell me, if it is right, of the Key. It is gone. How shall it come into the hands of the Holy Man and the Infidel?"

"I will tell, for there is one who sees us even now, from the days far off, yet soon to come," the Most High Nobleman to the Great God turned and looked directly at Palmer. "I speak of him of the future who witnesses this event—even the Infidel who sees, fallen from the far heavens, gazing back into these days by the power of the Creator. He watches us and waits to hear."

Palmer felt a chilling thrill at this. He marveled that Ambylor appeared to take all of this in stride—this servant of the plan speaking, apparently, into nothingness, as seen by Ambylor but was, in fact, conversing across centuries of time, toward Martin Palmer.

"Listen well, kind Infidel. The Key is to be gained in the high mountain of the One who sleeps, in the holy place there. The Holy Man shall know of it. Tell him." The man then turned quietly and strode off into the shadows of the dusk, carrying the orb and the stone, and was gone. Palmer found himself again in the present, with Gaultor.

"The artifacts shall fall into our hands when the time is right." Palmer told Gaultor. "Until then, we're supposed to find this Key you spoke of in some sort of holy place—whatever that is, up high in the mountain of the One who sleeps."

Gaultor nodded. "I know the place." He looked upward into the clouds. "The Place of Hope. It is up there. The road of the gods ends here at the shrine, but there is a secret path known only to the Most High Noblemen that shall take us to the holy place."

Gaultor looked around him. Dusk had fallen heavily. All Palmer could see of him now was a dim silhouette with only the suggestion of facial features. "The pathway has its treacherous turns. It is best that we rest here until dawn."

Palmer nodded. He noticed new hunger now, but it was only just a little less gnawing than the burden of exhaustion he suddenly felt weighing down over his shoulders and chest and eyes.

"Should we try to find food?" Palmer asked, looking around for some sort of comfortable place to sleep.

"You forget that I fast. If you wish . . ."

"No," Palmer said, fighting a yawn. "It would be too difficult, anyway." He found a place between two trees and walked over to it. After settling down, sleep dropped over him within minutes—a deep sleep that was heavier than Palmer had expected. He did not see what Gaultor did.

* * *

Gaultor had fixed him breakfast the next morning, as before. And, as before, the Mhyrnian refused to eat. Palmer wondered at this as he followed Gaultor up higher and higher into the mountain.

"Gaultor—that record I experienced—the one you said was enchanted?"

"Yes, Martin?" Gaultor pulled himself up over a craggy depression in the rocks they climbed. Palmer followed, grunting from the effort.

"In the record, Ambylor knew nothing of this Key we're trying to find."

"The existence of the Key has been kept as the greatest secret of the ways of Zorl—as a protection. That proves that the origin of that record of yours is unholy. And it is just as well, for if the existence of the Key were known, and it was stolen, then there would surely be little hope for the destruction of Procyx."

They climbed on in silence. Hours passed. By midday there were patches of snow everywhere, and by late afternoon, Palmer found himself shivering as he climbed blindly behind Gaultor. He didn't really care about his surroundings, now. There was only the climb. It grew colder and colder. The snow was deep and clouds hovered so close that Palmer felt he might reach up and touch them. The ascent had been an incredibly demanding climb—steep and, as Gaultor had promised, treacherous in places. Now, however, the greatest challenge was the cold. A meager wind amplified the chill by tens of degrees.

Still, they pushed on.

The clouds fell upon them at last in a heavy fog. It was as though the world was growing a misty, hazy gold and then pink and finally a lavender blue-gray.

"How much farther?" Palmer asked Gaultor who moved tiredly ahead of him. "It's getting dark. If we don't find shelter . . ."

Gaultor stopped. Palmer nearly ran into him but pulled himself up short. "What is it?"

"The Holy place," Gaultor said and disappeared suddenly into a dark cave that Palmer had only just now seen. Anxious to get out of the wind, Palmer followed.

The cave wound to the left and to the right, over and over. Palmer called out to Gaultor but received no answer. He pushed forward in the dark, bumping into a wall or two as the cave twisted and climbed. He persisted, stumbling, until at last, he thought he perceived the slightest traces of faint warmth, wafting invitingly on the air. He turned and followed it carefully. After a time and more twists of the cave, the sound of running water came to his ears. He pushed forward toward it faster—eagerly. Then, less than a minute later, Palmer found himself at the opening of a large, dimly lit, cavernous room, apparently hewn out of the rock.

Palmer stepped inside. The room must have measured twenty meters across and forty meters high. Opposite him was a doorway, behind which fell a constant flow of water—apparently the water he had heard. Behind the clear waterfall there was a wall of moss-covered stone. The ceiling was made of multicolored clear crystals, set in pluridium. Through it, the last of the daylight shone in fading illumination like stained glass. Gaultor stood in the center of the chamber near a large, circular pit, tossing in the dry branches of a vine that grew all around the walls.

Palmer moved further into the room, looking about him in fascination. The walls were dark, but dim, ancient-looking murals could be seen there.

"You may help me, as one of the Most High Noblemen," Gaultor said, looking up at him.

"Take only those branches and leaves that are dead."

Palmer obeyed. As he approached one of the vines he saw that the living leaves were white, apparently devoid of chlorophyll. Albino plants? He carefully picked the dead branches off the vines and nearly half an hour later, all that was dead lay in the pit. Gaultor knelt, now, removing his shoes. Then, raising his hands above his head, he spoke quietly.

The words were not Mhyrnese. Palmer watched for a time and then felt as if he should remove his boots. This he did, waiting.

Gaultor finished.

Suddenly the dead branches of vine in the pit burst into flame, filling the room with light. Palmer gazed at the fire, extending his hands to heat them by it. The room warmed to comfort. Palmer closed his eyes, relishing it.

He sat cross-legged before the fire for a while, watching it burn. The branches were engulfed in the flames, but they seemed not to be consumed. Palmer turned to tell Gaultor of it and saw the Mhyrnian gazing about at the paintings.

The murals were fascinating. They blended into one another, covering every square centimeter of the circular chamber. Palmer stood, gazing with Gaultor at them.

Central among them was a great tree. The structure of its branches and trunk made it look like a spreading fountain. The tree bore a white fruit that looked as if it glowed. Beneath it, men and women picked and ate the fruit and rejoiced. Above the tree there hovered in the air a majestic white city, taken up from the ground—rays of brilliance shining from it with a light that rivaled anything Palmer had ever seen executed in paint before.

He turned his eyes to the next scene. Here a man knelt before crystal stones. Several glowed as if with dazzling brilliance and from the smoke surrounding the hot stones a faint, shining hand could be seen, touching the crystals.

Another mural showed a man standing on a rock above an altar. The altar blazed with fire that stretched far out beyond it to consume vain men and burn trenches of water dug all about the altar. Above this figure, ascending into the far heavens, there rode a burning chariot.

Another scene shone two great waterfalls pouring onto dry ground and disappearing into it. Multitudes of people walked between the great falls, and mounted on a rock toward which they moved there stood a staff with a crosspiece lashed to it. On the staff there hung a snake and, above all of this, a column of flames that ascended up into the stars above.

Yet another mural showed a great statue made of many metals about to be smashed to pieces by a massive stone, rolling down from a great mountain.

"This is the Place of Hope," Gaultor said quietly. "And these are symbols—the shadows of the work of the Creator in another time on another world—even another universe. Shadows framing great truths to be revealed here and among all worlds some day—in due time. The Place of Hope. It is fitting that we come here for the great Key."

Palmer looked all around the room at the murals, the fire, the crystalline ceiling, the water falling behind the doorway leading to stone. At last he said, "What does this Key look like?"

Gaultor shook his head. "I don't know. It is small enough to be held in one's hand. Beyond that . . ."

From behind them, the fire from the pit flared. Both Palmer and Gaultor turned to look at it. It swirled upward into a dazzling, self-perpetuating column of flame. It spun and whirled like a great, standing vortex of light.

"Look!" Gaultor whispered. Palmer followed his gaze to the walls near the floor where the vines grew. Upon them grew exquisite, white blossoms. And now the waterfall roaring like the

waves of a great sea. Fire burned behind the water—hot, white fire.

"We are to go," Gaultor said evenly. "There."

Palmer looked at the dazzling, blazing waterfall. Gaultor bowed his head once then walked into the water. When he passed through it there was a blinding flash and he was gone.

Palmer stared after him, alone in the room. He could not be certain, but it seemed as though Gaultor had vaporized once he had passed through the water and touched the white fire. For a terrible moment, Palmer cowered back. All of this had happened so fast. He had had no designs on becoming a Most High Nobleman to the god Zorl. He had not wanted any of this. All he wanted was to see Procyx destroyed—to see his parents' deaths avenged.

The fire behind the water began to flicker. Was it going out? If it did, would he be trapped here, while Gaultor went on to . . . to what? The column of flames roared behind him. He looked around at the murals. They shone with a light of their own and there was depth to them. It was as if Palmer were looking out great windows at an ancient, unknown world beyond. The floating, shining city hurt his eyes to look at it. The glowing crystal stones bristled with living light.

The white fire flickered out for a moment, then spread back into life, tenuous, now. Palmer took a deep breath and walked into the falling water. A moment later, the white fire engulfed him—searing cold, or was it hot? He heard the rushing of great winds—the roar of endless oceans. It was dazzling! Brilliant!

And then he heard music . . .

## To be continued in the October 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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